Chapter 1: Alternatives

January 1894, Paris

The first two weeks after the fire in the Opera the thin young man in Antoinette's spare room barely ever spoke. He was awake most of the time, but seemed somehow not entirely present; he seemed to be so trapped in his thoughts that he remembered almost nothing of the things she told him or the events that transpired in the previous weeks. He later confirmed remembering Antoinette coming to get him and forcing him on his feet, covering him in a thick hooded cloak, but seemed to have no memory of how they reached her house. She was inclined to think it was more merciful that way since he wept silently all the way there. She put him in the same room as the first time he was at her house eleven years prior, hoping at least the familiarity of the place would be comforting to him; it was a small spare room her daughter never entered. She made sure he had all he would need and told him to keep quiet, or they'd both be doomed if they found him. Seemingly waking up from a trance, the man looked directly at her and nodded, only to continue staring straight ahead with a disturbingly empty look in his eyes.

The man, seemingly completely disconnected from the outside, was more of a raging storm on the inside, and it didn't take long for whatever was holding him together to break. Even though Antoinette had to admit he listened to her and didn't make a noise, she soon found out she would nevertheless not get to relax for a while longer. The morning after his return, she entered the room to find him curled up on the bed, clawing away at the skin of his neck and scalp; his face beneath the white leather mask was contorted in a silent scream. Tears streamed down his face as he seemed completely unaware of her presence. Antoinette found out in the following days that there are many ways someone can inflict harm upon himself without being heard or noticed, and she decided to keep a constant

watch on him. She spent those days in the room with him in near darkness, as the light seemed to upset him further, pretending she wasn't bothered by the nonsense that came out of his mouth or the incredibly eerie way he seemed to move around the room at times when he would grow more agitated. His movements were quick and silent, but looked unnatural somehow - twitchy like a ghost trapped in a doll, he seemed to have to make a conscious effort to navigate his body from the inside, but without any regard to the safety of the vessel that carried him. It wasn't her first time seeing him like this, but that didn't make it any less unnerving. He refused - or, more accurately, ignored completely - all the food she brought him, and seemed to be unable to sleep more than a few hours at a time, which meant she had to adapt and do the same if she wanted to keep watch. She wondered how long this would last, and if it would even get better at all as she sat next to him and witnessed his silent but obvious agony.

Just when she thought she would go insane as well, he calmed down. From then on, he tried to distract himself with anything he could get his hands on - but he still had so little focus that he couldn't do anything. He still seemed unable to hold a normal conversation, though at least he no longer talked absolute disconnected nonsense, and instead even got out an occasional lucid sentence or two. He would occasionally pick up a book that she brought him. She wished she could afford to let him play the piano, but it was out of the question - it attracted attention, and she was afraid somebody might connect two and two. Books provided him with temporary relief, letting him escape into some imaginary realm for a short time. Most of the time, though, he paced around the room or stared at some point in the wall. He still slept very little until he collapsed for nearly a day. In that state, those first weeks passed. He became more lucid after a while, but as his reason returned, he seemed to be drained of all emotion and energy he previously had. He remained on the bed, staring silently ahead, lost in his thoughts - which, if his words were any indication, were a horrible place to get lost in.

Antoinette being herself, it was only a matter of time before she lost her patience. After the man had sufficiently made his suffering known, she one day decided she'd had enough. Without warning, one evening she burst into

the room, violently drawing back the curtains and opening windows, tidying the room before turning to him.

"Get up!"

He didn't care.

"Get up, I said!"

He barely registered her through the haze of nonsensical thoughts occupying him.

"This is not a matter of debate! You will get up right now, and, and wash, and eat something, and we will talk about what we're going to do now!"

He had no energy to do any of that.

She must've realized that, and the annoyed, angry look on her face was replaced with concern.

She sat on the edge of the bed next to him, leaned on the wall, and spoke quietly this time.

"I know this must have been horrible for you. I care about you, and I am trying to help you. I thought you were getting better, but you went from constant outbursts to no emotion at all, and I don't see how that's better."

He didn't feel like debating if it was better to actively want to die or passively wait for it to happen, so he kept silent. But she continued.

"I want you to get on your feet and try to eat something for a change. You'll feel much better. Please. Get up and come with me."

I really could do that, he thought, if she gave me a few more weeks. Months, maybe. She does have a point. I feel bad for her, having me in her life again, taking care of me, and getting nothing in return. I guess she thought it would end differently when she pulled me out of that cage. She must've thought I would be a man worth something in the end, not this destructive unforgivable mons-

His inner monologue was interrupted when she threw an entire pitcher of cold water in his face.

"WHAT -"
"OH, so you can still speak! Good, now that I have your attention, you can go ahead and get up before I get more water! Either you will go willingly, or I swear I will drown you in this room one glass at a time!" Antoinette made a mental note she would later apologize for throwing something at his face, but right now she couldn't afford to show weakness. She looked at him authoritatively from above, her arms crossed and brow furrowed.

He stared at her with disdain. The shock of cold water combined with newfound hate for Antoinette did raise his pulse enough to make standing more doable. She grabbed his arm and pulled him to his feet, and he stayed there, realizing he was weak with hunger.

"Very well. I'll go", he managed through his teeth. His voice sounded lower and coarser than he remembered it.

"Great!" she smiled, "Clean clothes are waiting for you in the bath. Come to the kitchen when you're ready." She patted him on the back gently, sending him on his way. He had already committed to this, he realized, so there was no quitting now.

The man locked the bathroom door behind him, covered the mirror with a towel, and, lowering his mask on the cabinet, started washing his face and hair in the small sink. He had to admit his head did feel a bit less clouded afterward, as he dried his hair with the towel, facing away from the mirror. He had always enjoyed it, the small pleasure of feeling clean and smelling good. He never really had the luxury until he met Antoinette eleven years prior. He could remember washing the dirt and smell and neglect off of his abused, emaciated body; her bandaging his wrists and ankles, treating him like a being worthy of sympathy and care. He had made it a point to do that regularly from then on, not only for cosmetic reasons. It made him feel more... well, human.

Eventually, he put on some fresh clothes and joined her in the kitchen. As she was heating a stew, she looked over at him and smiled. She was making

a conscious effort to seem normal and cheerful, and it grated against her ears, but she had to do something.

"My boy! You look better already. Come, sit and eat first. We'll talk later." He obediently sat down at the table and looked at her, stiff and silent, anxiously waiting for her to talk. He was aware this wouldn't go on forever but dreaded being kicked out so soon. There was nowhere to go, and the world didn't seem particularly friendly. She waited for him to finish eating before she pushed the subject again.

"I'm very glad you're feeling better, Erik. I'd like to help you get out of this alive, one way or another."

She paused.

"But, I am afraid that this is all I can do for you. I can't give you anything but this one spare room, and that's not much of a living. The police are still looking for you. We need a long-term plan."

"Do you perchance have any other basements I could hide in?" he asked dryly, and she slapped his arm.

"Oh, and that attitude is back already! Good to see you alive, Erik."

"Mhm."

"No, I don't. As much as I would like to have you within my sight, too, I'm afraid you won't be safe as long as you stay in France."

"That much is clear."

"Yes, I've thought about it for some time, and I think it's best if we get you out of here. I'll find you a ship, I have some savings to pay your fare-
""Madam, I'd say those savings are better spent on someone who's not a criminal- ""Quiet, now, they are my savings, and I'll spend them as I like. I'll find a ship that goes somewhere far, arrange that they take you, no questions asked, and you might even have some spare money, so you can survive at first."

"But-"

"Do you wish to argue minute details of your escape, which I will pay for and arrange, with me?"

"No."

"Then it's decided. I admit I have no idea how you'll survive once you get there." She looked up from her plate at him, suddenly sharp and formidable. „But I want you to know this. I am doing this for you. I am doing this because I truly believe, from the bottom of my heart, that you will make it right this time. No one else can be hurt. I'll do everything in my power to help you live like an honest man, but you have to promise me that you'll do just as much."

He suddenly felt very small.

"I'll try."

"You'll try your very best to respect what I'm doing and what I believe to be true about you."

Yes. Although I think you're mistaken. But I'll try."

"Then it will be worth it."

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Her life was not going very well, as much as it hurt her to admit. She walked towards the small orphanage where she worked, remembering there was a time when she got up in the morning eager to see her children and skipped through the streets with a smile on her face. Lately, she found herself with less and less energy to go about her daily life.

If something doesn't change, I might have to go back home, she thought. It was not a good option. She'd rather avoid admitting defeat; moreover, she'd rather avoid living under her father's roof again. The thought made her uneasy.

If I couldn't be happy in the wrong place doing the wrong things, I simply had to change something. It was never a problem before. Why is it a problem now?

The answer was almost physically painful to think about.

I'm not in the wrong place and these are not the wrong things.

I'm the one that needs to change.

She opened the door to the orphanage and took off her coat and fur hat, shaking off the snow.

"Good morning, Miss Alina!" a tiny, seven-year-old girl ran up to her and embraced her.

She smiled sincerely, some of her bad mood dissipating. "Good morning, Alice. How are you today?" She followed the girl into the small classroom, pulling up her sleeves and beginning a long day of work.

Later that day, walking back through the snowy streets alone, Alina realized she felt tired, and not just from the amount of standing, running, and talking she had done. A different kind of tiredness sat on her shoulders, and she had no idea how to brush it off, only that thinking about how to solve it made her slightly more tired.

"Good evening, Mrs. Bigley", she smiled her best smile as she entered the hallway to her tiny apartment, passing her landlady who was currently sweeping the hallway floor.

"Good evening, dear. You look tired. Are you alright?" The middle-aged woman with her hair in a strict bun looked at her with worry.

"I am", she replied politely, not eager to explain which of the two. „How are you, madam?"

"Oh, you know", she laughed. „Earnest and I are going on a little trip next month. It's our anniversary. A little getaway in the countryside, just for a week."

"Congratulations!" Alina lit up.

"Isn't your birthday in a few weeks as well, dear?" Mrs. Bigley was good at chatting and doing chores at the same time, and Alina looked around for something to do to help her. She felt awkward just standing there and watching her work.

"It is", she admitted, opening a small closet door to take another broom. Not that it's much more efficient like this. „I'll be twenty-five. It sounds strange, doesn't it?"

"It sounds like you're getting old", Mrs. Bigley laughed. „Are you going home to celebrate?"

"Home? No, that's unlikely. It's a long and expensive trip, and I have work to do", she repeated the excuse she wrote in the letter to her mother. "But I might visit my - uh, aunt - in Paris for a few days. I wrote her a letter some time ago, we'll see what she says. I haven't seen her in a while", she started talking, forgetting to sweep. "Mrs. Bigley, what do you think it takes for a person to feel like they matter?"

"Pardon me, dear?" Mrs. Bigley stopped as well to look at her.

"What do you think would take for a person to... feel like their existence made a difference?" she asked, suddenly feeling stupid. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's gotten into me lately. I do need a holiday."

"Are you alright, dear?" Mrs. Bigley asked. "Do you feel like you don't matter?"

"No, no, it's stupid. Forget I said anything."

The woman shot a glance at her from the corner of her eyes. "I suppose one would feel that way if they knew there were people left behind them who remembered them. Whose lives they changed, somehow."

"I suppose. And how does one go about achieving that?"

"That depends on the path they choose." Mrs. Bigley didn't like where this was going and felt it was her duty to at least try to talk some sense into her eccentric young friend. Alina had been living under her roof for several years now, and was, by all means, a good tenant - she never caused trouble, she helped around the house and kept her rooms and kitchen clean, and she would sometimes sit with Mrs. Bigley and chat politely over tea. Mrs. Bigley had grown used to chatting with her on weekends; it did not escape her that the young lady was growing somewhat weary and less energetic than her normal tireless self, and Mrs. Bigley thought it had something to do with the fact she spent more and more of her days working at that orphanage and spent a lot less time with her friends and family; as most of the other young ladies went to pursue other paths in life. "I think you're just lonely, dear. It doesn't take grand-scale fame and glory to be important, you know. Sometimes it's enough to have people you love, a family, and someone to take care of. You're a lovely young lady, and I'm sure if you could take a break from losing your nerves over other people's children, you would find it more enjoyable to lose your nerves over your children. They do come with husbands, as a bonus", Mrs. Bigley winked.

"You think that's what I need? It would make me happy?"

"I think so."

I don't, Alina sighed.

"Oh, I almost forgot. You were waiting for a letter from Paris?" Mrs. Bigley turned around to reach one of the shelves. "Something did arrive. Here you go, darling. I hope you have a wonderful time with your aunt." She gave her a small bundle of letters, taking the broom gently from her hand. She thought it was a sweet gesture - Alina always trying to help her with whatever she was doing - and had no heart to tell her in the end it would often give her more work to do to fix the things Alina did wrong (or at least did completely different from how a competent and proper English housewife would do them, maybe due to cultural differences).

"My- oh, thank you. I should read this now. Have a nice evening, madam", she excused herself.

Alina went up to her room to read the letters that had arrived - one from her mother, about how disappointed she was Alina wouldn't visit this winter; one from her father, which contained more of the same but worded in a way that made Alina's skin crawl a tiny bit more, one from her sister - a birthday card with a badly-drawn picture of Alina surrounded by seventeen cats, and the one from Paris, with the return address of one Antoinette Giry.

Alina read the letter from her lifelong friend and mentor once, then twice, and then for the third time, trying to decide what to think about it. It seemed she would be visiting auntie Giry very soon, and it also seemed it would be more eventful than she had previously imagined. Auntie had a proposition for her - to put it that way, because to Alina it seemed more like she needed help. Alina needed help from Antoinette so many times in her life that there was no chance she would ever refuse to return the favor if asked; the fact that Antoinette would not tell her openly exactly what she needed to be made her more than a little worried.

Taking out her little timetable containing schedules of various trains, Alina wrote a brief reply confirming her arrival in Le Havre next week.

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The next few days were spent negotiating and preparing. Antoinette took a train to Le Havre and spent days trying to find a ship with low enough standards to accept any passengers without asking questions, while Erik nervously paced around the room cleaning up the mess, packing up, and readying himself, somewhat better now that he had something to do. Antoinette's daughter, Meg, between work and her friends only came home to sleep and wasn't altogether hard to avoid; Erik would only have to be careful to keep quiet and not leave a trace of his presence when she was around. Whatever excuses Antoinette gave her for her absence, something about meeting some young former protégée of hers in Le Havre, Meg must have believed them. After a few days, Antoinette found a small cargo ship with a remarkably uncaring captain. As long as „her son" didn't disturb the crew or try to sabotage the ship, he said, he was fine to go, but if he tried anything, his boys would make sure he wasn't a nuisance anymore. Provided he even survived the journey across the Atlantic Ocean in winter. Antoinette paid him a generous sum in advance and told him he'd get the rest when they arrived, and a bonus if she got a letter from her son confirming his safe arrival to his destination. This seemed to seal the deal for the man, and Antoinette sincerely hoped he valued money more than Erik valued his own life. She went back, not at all reassured.

"What do you think of him?", Erik asked Antoinette that evening when she came back to tell him the news.

"I'd rather not think of him at all. Not a likable man. But I've heard he does keep his word, and he agreed to take you for the money I offered. He won't harm you, but he won't lift a finger to help you, either. You're on your own."

Erik nodded. That much he had learned by now. The thought of going outside and putting his life in the hands of those people horrified him, but upon reminding himself it was his fault, he decided to keep his pride and not voice out his concerns.

Antoinette knew him well, though.

"That sounds rather bad now that I think about it."

"I'll manage it. I can take care of myself, I'm not a child."

"You'll have to since we have no other option. And I believe you're capable of surviving anything at this point." She smiled. The sincerity in her compliment didn't escape him, but he never was very good at receiving her compliments, so he brushed it off. „There are also other matters we have to discuss."

"Such as?"

"Well, such as the fact your spoken English is not that good, you are still wanted here and are otherwise not very welcome as an immigrant in the New World. It's not just sailing the sea, you have to stay there once you reach New York." She tried to sound casual as she recited her prepared speech.

"I'll sneak in. I'm good at it", he shrugged.

"You are", she nodded, "but there might be another way. I know someone who can go with you and help get you across the border. It might be a chance for you to get a better start. Not from the absolute bottom."

That was rather unexpected. He stared at her in shock for a moment.

"And just why would this someone do that? Is this a person with nothing better to do? Someone who regularly smuggles people into America? What even makes you think I want that?"

"You do want that. It would make a huge difference to have someone of trust for a change."

"Why would I trust this hypothetical person?"

"It's not a hypothetical person. She's here in Paris, and I'd trust her with my own life as I would with yours." For all it was worth, Antoinette was telling the truth; the problem was whether that would be enough.

"She?"

"Yes, in fact, it's a she. She is a friend of mine that I've known since she was a child. She'd gladly help you, I think, partly as a favor to me. She owes me

a few favors for similar reasons that you do. Also, her heart is in the right place. She'll do it if it's the right thing to do."

Erik was annoyed for most of this conversation, and he felt it intensifying as tingly spikes of anger crept up his spine. He realized he was raising his voice halfway through the sentence.

"But it's not the right thing to do, is it, she'd be smuggling a goddamned freak of nature who also happens to be a criminal and I don't see how her righteous sensitivities would be alright with that!"

"Well perhaps if you had paid any attention to anything I've been saying and doing until now you'd notice that not everyone's righteous sensitivities are as shallow as you make them out to be!" She stood up, yelling as well. He couldn't say anything to that. Erik had never in any way diminished what Antoinette did for him and now was not the time to start.

He was well aware he owed her his life and sanity, and a very basic sense of decency told him he should probably not be making miserable the only person close to family he had left. If she wanted him to play along in this then he would have to do so. For now, at least.

"Alright. How will I find this person?"

"You don't have to. I'll have her come over in a few days so you can meet her without risking being seen."

"What?"

"Yes. I'll give you time to prepare. Be polite."

"I don't- "

"For Christ's sake, Erik, you'll survive! If you absolutely cannot cooperate, you can bloody well go on your own! Just give it that one shot at having someone help you for once!"

He nodded without a word, still furious. Antoinette excused herself to bed and he went to his little room to think.

Antoinette always had a specific way of shutting Erik up. Never in his adult life did he put up with someone yelling at him - well, except for, actually never mind - but Antoinette was different, and she was so good at it.

She showed a strange mixture of acceptance for who he was, as well as high expectations for who he should become. It made her a very hard person to disappoint. She had always managed to criticize his actions without ever insulting him - a natural teacher, perfected by decades in the ballet.

When Erik first met her, he found her extremely strange. Until then, he thought there were very limited things he could be - such as a monster, a freak, a demon, and so on. Whatever he did, he felt it confirmed one or more of those attributes.

He found it shocking when he first did something that made her mad and she didn't suddenly think he was the devil himself all along and wanted to send him back.

Although he did hear his fair share of scolding over the years, he never felt any doubt in her care for him - which was not something he could say about anyone else in his life. It took him a while to understand some things she took as simple truths, such as that people are people, even when they do something wrong or look a certain way. He was not entirely sure he accepted that yet. If she's not there, will I still be myself?

As his anger dissipated, Erik realized that soon he might never see her again.

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"What... have you told her about me, exactly?" Erik asked carefully, unsure if he wanted to know.

"That you're a fugitive and that I needed her help so you could escape unnoticed."

"And she didn't question it?" He raised his eyebrows under the mask.

"It's not that she didn't question it so much that she didn't question me", Antoinette admitted. "I told her a friend of mine was escaping the police, and that I want to help him escape because I think a lot of injustice has been done to him and he deserves a chance to start anew."

"She seems to trust you a great deal." I almost feel bad that you're deceiving her like this, he thought, but he couldn't help but feel grateful that she wouldn't know all the gritty details.

"We do share some similar attitudes towards the world", she shrugged. "In any case, you can tell her as much or as little about yourself as you please once you're on your way."

"We'll see what she says once she comes here." Erik was still furious about it all. He didn't want to be sitting there, meeting a strange woman and dealing with her inevitable reactions. He had had enough of those in his lifetime, and he didn't even want to interact with a single person in the whole world at that moment. Why do I even need this? I'd always found a way to survive alone.

The recent realization that Giry would soon be gone; rather, that he would be gone kept him silent. He noticed she looked much older as of late, tired somehow, perhaps from the strain of having to care for someone going through a mental breakdown. All of it made him... sad. Not furiously, maddeningly sad like before, but simply sad. It kept him calmer. He tried hard as he could to make her life easier.

When the woman - Alina, was it? - arrived, Erik was hesitant. He truly, really didn't want to deal with the possibility of Antoinette being wrong. A woman screaming after seeing him would not only grate on his already raw

nerves but would also be quite dangerous in this situation. He remained in my designated room while Antoinette went out to greet the woman. He checked everything twice - his shirt covered every single part of his arms, his gloves were in place, his mask never even left his face but he checked it twice and tied a few more knots, anyway. Just as he was considering tying a couple more just in case, Antoinette came in.

"Would you like to join us?"

No, I definitely would rather stay here. But he went after her, anyway.

As he entered the living room he noticed her immediately.

An unusually tall woman - although, the top of her head still barely reached above Erik's chin - stood in the middle of the room and looked around nervously. She turned her head immediately when she heard him arriving. She was tall, slim, and long-limbed; dressed in a very simple black dress and jacket. Her hair was brown, pulled back in a bun, her eyes beneath dark eyebrows were brown, and her skin was a light olive-brown. She looked vaguely foreign - Italian, maybe. Maybe not. Erik was told she only spoke English and some convoluted Slavic mess of a language. Her jaw was sharp and angular, but her eyes beneath dark eyebrows were soft. Warm and friendly. He could see why Antoinette trusted her - something about the warm eyes and inviting smile. Her eyes widened slightly when she saw him, and he braced himself for what would happen next - but nothing happened. She composed herself within a second, as something definitely neither soft nor warm swiftly passed through her eyes.

Erik found himself observing her more carefully than he had intended to.

Alina, on the other hand, had to give herself credit for keeping her wits about her as auntie Giry introduced her to the strangest man she had ever seen in her life. Auntie did mention Don't gawk at the mask, my dear, which Alina would not have done anyway since she did understand the concept of manners. But I guess in her good intentions she forgot to mention everything else, she thought, such as the fact he was incredibly tall and eerily thin and so pale or that his overall posture and mannerisms were quite intimidating or that his eyes beneath the mask were an unmistakeable shade

of yellow. Not that I mind that, she thought. The yellow eyes are rather striking.

On an otherwise frightening fellow.

A mask made of some kind of white leather covered most of his face, with only enough of his mouth and lower jaw exposed that he could talk and eat. For what it was worth, it seemed like a normal-looking jaw, but it unnerved Alina that she couldn't see his facial expressions. Above the mask, straight black hair hung a bit messy around his temples. It might've looked good if he'd combed it back, but it looked like he just snipped the front parts so they wouldn't get in his eyes, and then someone tried to salvage it by cutting it short and tidy on the back of his head.

Alina only had to keep her face straight for a split second before she remembered that her mother didn't raise her to be a judgemental arse towards people she didn't even know. In a desperate attempt to not make the man more self-conscious than he probably already was, she smiled her best pleased-to-meet-you smile and introduced herself like a proper human being.

„Glad to meet you, sir. I'm Alina." She held out her hand. Right hand, too. She didn't make the stupid mistake of offering someone her left hand again and then having to explain it's my dominant hand-

But the man stood still and looked at her in that same unnerving manner that made her feel very insecure. What did I do? What did I do? Did I offend him? She wondered before noticing in the corner of her eye that his hands were covered with gloves and that his body was almost completely covered in clothing and oh my God he probably doesn't like when people touch him he's going to be offended now so she started lowering her hand -

- but he accepted it and lightly shook it for a second. Alina felt her heart start beating for the first time in what felt like an eternity.

God, I hate meeting people. I hate people. I'm not too fond of myself at this moment either.

„Hello", he said quietly.

Antoinette gestured for them to sit down at the kitchen table, pouring Alina a cup of coffee - which, thankfully, have her something to occupy her hands with. What an absurd situation, she thought. What is wrong with me? Have I lost my mind? I'm not a child anymore, and I'm not so delicate to be afraid of anything, let alone some unknown man. I am an adult, and I will handle this like one. She decided to gather herself quickly.

The man observed Alina quietly and for a moment she thought his unusual eyes could see all of her secrets.

She noticed he wasn't drinking anything. Well, that's his problem, she thought as she drank Giry's delicious coffee a little too quickly for a proper young lady.

„How have you been, Alina?" Antoinette said. „I have not seen you in ages."

„No one has seen me in ages, actually", she replied sadly. „I've been busy."

„How's work?"

„Distressing. Depressing. Underpaid. Poor job security."

„Who's upsetting you, the children?", she asked.

„The kids are alright, for most of the time, they do the best they can. We get along. It's the adults that bother me daily." The man - Erik, she remembered - was looking at her with interest now.

„Shame", she said, „but I do believe you're making a difference, there. Didn't you mention the orphanage children were getting calmer and friendlier over the past few months?"

„It's not like they could have gotten louder and more problematic, ma'am."

She laughed. „Well, at any point, you did some good there. Am I right in assuming that you're ready for a change of scenery now?"

„You are right, yes. This job is eating me alive."

She did it subtly, but the tone of the conversation shifted slightly. Alina knew what Antoinette was referring to because they had spoken about it earlier, and it still made her suspicious. She already knew that she wouldn't say no, and she knew that Antoinette knew it, and it made her even more suspicious. The whole thing didn't seem so bad at first, and Alina trusted that Antoinette wouldn't just trick her into a dangerous situation for no good reason.

But she was still on her toes, more from the presence of the eerily silent man.

„I'd like to discuss this directly", she said. She happened to hate covert, roundabout, walking-on-eggshells type of conversations. She turned to the man, who was still silently attentive.

„You'd like me to go with you to New York and ensure you get in with as little trouble as possible, and teach you some English, and make sure they don't kick you out or kill you when you arrive. Right?"

He paused. „Yes and no."

„Sorry?" she raised her eyebrows.

He paused again. „I am better at listening than speaking English." Alina noticed he sounded very pleasant when he spoke, his voice deep and melodic. His accent was strange, pronunciation slightly awkward. Did he learn this much without actually speaking it to anyone?

Gesturing at Antoinette, he continued, „she wants you to do it, not I. Her idea."

Well, this was not mentioned. Alina didn't like it.

„And what do you want?" she asked him, lowering her cup on the table.

The question caught him off guard. „I don't know."

„I've been told you have no other option but to escape. That the Parisian police will surely hunt you down if you stay here, and then it's over for you."

„That is true."

„I've also been told that you know absolutely nobody in the world that would help you escape, except for auntie Giry, and if I go with you, then also me."

„Also true."

„Do you think you can manage it alone, then?"

„Maybe", he replied slowly.

„Would someone please explain what is going on, then?" Alina asked, feeling like she didn't want to get involved in all this.

Antoinette opened her mouth, but he waved his hand at her, still looking at Alina. He seemed impressed by the fact she was speaking and looking at him at the same time.

„I don't care what happens to me. I don't care if I live or die. She cares."

He continued, „She also thinks I deserve to live, and I don't. I think you should know that."

I was right, she thought. I don't want to get involved in all this.

And, she realized, she was getting angry. But this was something she could deal with. The angrier she got, the less afraid she was, and found herself suddenly much more composed than moments prior. I think I know what this is about, it dawned on her. I've seen this type of situation in the orphanage, and back when I worked at the hospital.

Just another crisis to handle. Nothing personal.

Alina turned toward Antoinette, suddenly realizing what the problem was.

„Auntie Giry, this man does not want to go with me."

Antoinette gave her a look that could have easily cut straight through a stone cliff. „You promised me. Seventeen years ago. Do you remember?"

„I do very much remember, Madam. And if you are honestly saying this man is being unfairly hunted down, if you say he deserves an honest chance, then by God I believe you because I know you and I've never seen you wrong in your assessments of people's character. You told me that Erik is a good person, and by my heart, I believe it, I swear."

He looked a bit shaken now. Good, she thought. I want him to be. Antoinette, on her end, still looked at her with icy anger that made Alina's skin crawl.

„However," she continued, doing her best to seem convincing and authoritative, „I find it unfair to force my assistance on anyone, no matter how few options they may have left. This man may not have much of a choice, but out of respect for his human dignity we have to still let him choose."

Antoinette went silent as Alina turned to the seemingly suicidal stranger sitting across from her.

„I have worked with various people for close to seven years now, sir, and I am very good at what I do. But I have never denied someone the basic choice of accepting or ignoring my help. It would be an offense to you, as well as me, to be put in such a situation. If you wish for me to travel with you, I will, and I expect nothing in return save for the same respect I have shown you. If you do not, however, I won't do it, even if it means owing this debt to madam Giry for the rest of my life."

He took his time processing her words. He looks a bit too shocked by being called a good person, she thought. Something about it suddenly made her incredibly sad.

He nodded. „I'll go", and after a short pause, added, „With you."

Antoinette smiled.

„But", he said, „I have a... hm. Condition?" He was unsure about the word, not the fact that he wanted to negotiate, it seemed.

„Alright, I'm listening", Alina nodded.

He took a deep breath while he composed the sentence in his mind and for a moment, he seemed more relatable. Likable, even, Alina thought.

„As I said, I don't care if I live or die. There is only one thing I want to avoid." He looked straight at her again with those unnerving eyes - „I don't want to be caught. I don't want to be in chains until I die. I prefer if you kill me, rather than let them have me."

„What?" What?

„Yes. I don't want to live like an animal. I'd rather die than let it happen again." In a very upside-down, messed-up way, Alina could see how that made sense. What does he mean, again? "You sound like you understand that", he added, nodding at her.

I knew this would somehow be my fault, she thought weakly. I knew these rants about freedom and human rights would bury me someday. It's sort of fitting.

"And you want me to promise that I'd kill you if they catch you?" was all she could manage.

He shrugged. "Not really. I know how. Just promise to help me do it."

Alina came very close to killing herself at that very moment for the sake of getting out of that situation. Antoinette was still so furious that Alina was afraid she might end the dilemma right then and there by straight-up murdering them both. I still owe her. I promised to pass on the favor, to do some good in this world. She never asked anything from me until now.

But, how can I promise something like this?

He put his elbows on the table and watched Alina intently with his fingers crossed in front of his mouth. Alina gave her best to think about it rationally, despite the distracting, unnerving eyes poking holes in her head. Between the sleeve and the glove, a small patch of pale skin shone on the man's wrist. He didn't seem to notice his sleeve shifting and revealing it.

And on the pale wrist sat an even paler, deeply indented, ancient scar.

That's a peculiar location for a scar, Alina thought. It looks too thick to be caused by a razor. Handcuffs, sooner. Ropes? Shackles?

Alina suddenly knew exactly what she would do, reason is damned.

"I'll do it, alright. They won't catch you while I'm alive." She paused, suddenly having another disturbing thought. "Although I also have one condition. As long as they don't catch you, you'll make an effort to stay alive. You'll go out of your way to live. Not harming anybody, including yourself. Is that fair?"

He thought about it, but ultimately knew he wouldn't get a better deal.

"That is fair", he nodded.

"Alright then. It's a deal." Alina offered the man her hand again - the right one - and he shook it lightly. She found herself smiling as a wave of relief washed over her. I did my best, auntie Giry. It'll have to do.

"I'm glad to be traveling with you", Alina said doing her best to be civil, and though it was true she was glad to be going away, she was also truthfully horrified by the idea of crossing the Atlantic in winter in a ship full of strangers and the human embodiment of an impassable maze.

Erik looked at Alina somewhat suspiciously. Perhaps the same thing occurred to him.

Chapter 2:Goodbyes

"Good day, Jean. I'm sorry you have to be here today. She could see he was delighted by the small gift. "It's not a problem, Madame. I enjoy the quiet for a change after all the ruckus we always get this time of year. It's not that bad. "There's no one here but me and the opera ghost," he laughed. "You don't believe all that nonsense, do you?" "This opera is worse than a sewing circle." "No, Madame, I'm a man of science," he winked at her playfully."Good. "I'll just take care of my business and leave." "Go ahead, Madame." She went up to her room and locked the door, taking off her gloves and hat. "Erik, are you there?" She said to the empty room.No one answered. "I just came by to give you something." "I'll leave it here on my table, but I can't stay here too long or someone might come looking for me." No one answered.She walked up to the tiny table in the corner of the room, taking out a small package and setting it down with care. "Hereis. Merry Christmas, Erik. These cookies are a present from me. Please stopstealingsweetsfromthemanager'soffice. I'm not angry, so you can come out." I'll see you soon. Goodbye."She stopped before unlocking the door to take a scarf out of her purse and wrap it around her neck. She'd never been caught in a lie, and she had no intention to start now.As she left, a very thin figure emerged silently from the shadows and grabbed the small package, disappearing swiftly into the darkness again.She left the same way, nodding to the receptionist."Merry Christmas, Jean.""Merry Christmas, Madame. "Did you see the opera ghost?" he asked playfully."Not today. "I suppose he wasn't in the mood for talking."She stepped back into the cold, snowy streets, shuddering.Meg was waiting for her to come home. She picked up her pace. One cannot leave a child unattended for too long.Several hundred kilometers to the east, Alina woke up with a mixture of dread and excitement.What seemed to her like a horde of relatives arrived last night, and today she had to go and greet them all with her best

dress and her best pleased to meet you smile.It better be the best one. She was determined this year that she wouldn't tick anyone off or let anyone tick her off. She wanted a peaceful family Christmas, and she was determined that her foul mouth wouldn't get her into trouble this time.She got dressed a little too slowly for the sake of prolonging the blessed peace and jumped a little when her sister entered the room, already dressed and properly attired."Alina, there you are! "

Come down already; everyone's here.""Oh, not everyone at the same time. That was so much social interaction and etiquette all at once that she might faint. Or at least pretend to faint, if only to see Mama's face."Well, you could have gotten up
earlier."Amelija was right, of course."Please refrain from sassing our elders while we're down there." Mama and Tata are doing their best, but you know how they get when they're pressed from all sides like this."Yes, yes, I know." I will.
"Unless they provoke me,""Especially if they provoke you, Alina. "She rolled her eyes. Getting scolded by her younger sister made her severely annoyed every time, but Amelia was so good at keeping a cool head that Alina might benefit from following her
example."Fine.""And relax. Everyone's excited to see you. They brought presents. "I have a present for you too, but you can't see it until Christmas day." "I have one for you as well." She remembered the pair of hairpins wrapped neatly in her desk drawer. "Let's go." As they walked down the stairs, Amelija suddenly turned to her and whispered, "How long do you think until the first argument?" I'm taking bets, and my cousin Jelka is betting her gloves on Tata and my uncle, breaking the ice by fighting about politics. "Could you cause some minor ruckus early so I win?" She flashed a brilliant smile, entering the room completely calm and graceful.Alina was not so composed, and she had to stay a moment longer to let out a loud laugh in the hallway.She heard her mother speaking in the next
room."What is it with her?""No idea, mama. She's gone mad. But at least she's in a good mood, no?" Let her be."Alina gathered herself quickly and entered the room, still snickering slightly, ready to face the enormous, well-meaning, deafening horde.The strangely controlled, anxious, manipulative woman left after talking through some details of the plan with Antoinette and drinking what seemed to be an entire gallon of
strong coffee.She asked about Meg and sent her love, wishing she had

more time to see her. It didn't escape Erik how tense she was the whole time. She let some of it show, but most of it poured out of her through small changes in the pitch of her voice, barely noticeable gestures, and the way her eyes darted around the room when she talked.She was unnerved by him but tried to hide it, going out of her way to show politeness and respect.He had to admit that he appreciated the charade.She thought he was a creepy man, sure, but at least she was certain enough that he was a man to feel ashamed of it.She acted similarly to Antoinette when she was working in the opera. Still herself, but with a strict professional cover on top. Erik could not discern how she felt about everything because she kept distracting him with words she thought would be the right ones to say.Yet he was sure she was genuine when she promised to help him. She looked straight into his eyes as she gave her speeches, and he could tell that she truly believed the message behind them, even if the way she said it was carefully calculated to produce the desired effect.Her sincerity shook him a bit, and in the end, it was the sentiment that convinced him to cooperate more than the wrappings, although the wrappings were lovely.We'll see.The preparations took quite some time. Alina had to get back to London because that's where she lives; she only came to Paris to see Marie Antoinette for the winter holidays, as she was kind enough to explain to him, even though he never asked.That made sense since she doesn't speak French, although Erik hadn't thought of it before. She said she'd take care of her business, pack up, and meet them the day before the ship sails out of Le Havre in two weeks.

For two weeks, Erik is jittery and nervous. He didn't have much to pack up; most of his belongings were left at the opera.Antoinette, seeing his misery, tried sneaking back in to get some of them, finding her way through the basements according to his instructions.She found only some clothes, some of his drawings, notes, and books."Have you perhaps seen my violin? "He asked tentatively, afraid of the answer.The face she made immediately confirmed his fears to be true. "I have seen parts of a violin." Erik, "I'm sorry.He felt furious. "What kind of savage breaks a violin?""What did the violin do to anybody? ""A lot of good and valuable things are broken back there." She offered that it may have been an accident.Something told him it wasn't an accident. She couldn't look directly at him.Erik sighed, remembering his resolution not to make her life harder.

"Thank you anyway."oooooo

much change done as you'd like if you're a young woman around here. I'm also trying to find my luck and my success because I don't want to spend my life living in your shadow or under your control. I hope you can understand.I don't blame you for anything, and I hope you won't blame me.Send my love to everyone.Love,Alina.P.S. Don't tell Amelia that I stole her hairpins. I'll send her new ones from the Yankees.It was good enough," Alina thought. She would have to give it to Auntie Giry to send after she leaves, because if she gets it too soon, that stubborn woman might just fly over to France on her proverbial broomstick and snatch her out of the sky to bring her home.It was carefully constructed, although not entirely true.

Alina had no idea who this trusted friend was, and he'd certainly said nothing remotely close to watching over her." But she'd been lying to her mother for many years.It's not so much that Alina got better at it as that her mother had gotten used to it, and when Alina ran off somewhere with a stupid excuse, she wouldn't flinch any longer because it had happened so many times.Alina was resourceful enough not to die on her own.Her father had an entirely different story, which was why the letter was not addressed to him. She thought, I'm sure they'll figure it out amongst themselves, she thought.So will the others at the orphanage.Alina gave her supervisors a fair two-week notice before she left, and she also sent letters explaining how she dealt with the more peculiar children.She made an effort to soften their transition after she left as much as she could.This letter was the last thing she had to do before she left, so she braided her hair, put on her coat and fur hat, and left her apartment. She tried her best to travel light, but the bag was still incredibly heavy, and her feet were slipping a little through the snow. She left the keys to Mr. and Mrs.She did as Bigley had promised, wishing them good luck, and headed straight on the train to Portsmouth, where a ship headed to Le Havre was waiting for her. She waved goodbye to London in her mind. I might miss this depressing place.I'll miss the depressing children, for sure. I'll miss my friends, though I've not made many of them. I'll miss the street cats. Damn, I might just miss them the most.The ferry to Le Havre was boring, as always.Alina tried reading to pass the time and sketching a little in her notebook, but it was no good. She couldn't focus. This trip has had her on edge for weeks—so much so that she almost forgot her birthday.She only remembered it two days prior, and it made her panic. She had not imagined her twenty-fifth birthday going like this. She had imagined it with

pomp and circumstance and a large celebration.If she thought back far enough, she used to imagine it with a husband and a bunch of little children.She thought it was strange how, as she got older, she no longer wanted the things she once did or thought she should—want.And now she was running away to the Wild West with a man she could not figure out for the life of her.Sometimes I understand why my mother is always yelling.She had decided to drown her anxiety by baking a cake and some cookies and singing Happy Birthday to herself like a madwoman, barely quietly enough to not attract attention from Mrs. Bigley downstairs.She drank some of the rum; she intended to put it in the cake; and she fell asleep giggling after the treats were done. Luckily, she woke up fine today, so she managed to clean up, pack up, and get on the ferry without trouble.Meanwhile, Antoinette and Erik had to take a carriage to Le Havre to get to the ship. The train was out of the question, but Audrey managed to find a closed carriage with heavy curtains.They spent the trip in silence, and Antoinette decided it was best to leave Erik alone, seeing how anxious he seemed about what awaited him. She then found a small room close to the docks with a tiny kitchen and bathroom for one night and tipped the owner well. Erik had to wear a scarf over his face the entire time and a hood over his head because the gendarmes were everywhere.Thankfully, it was so cold that nobody noticed much of their surroundings.He put his bag in the corner of the room, knowing full well that he would have a long and completely sleepless night ahead of him when Anne hurried him back out."Alina is coming soon." "Come, we're going to get her."A ntoinette sat on a bench far from the crowd, waiting for the ferry from Portsmouth to arrive, as Erik stood in the shadows, leaning on the wall behind her. A crowd of people poured out, with Alina among the last, tripping while carrying a very large travel bag. She wore a thick black coat and a Russian-style fur hat, with her hair underneath braided in one long side-braid. Antoinette waved at her, and she hurried toward the bench as Erik sadly left his comfortable spot to join them. It would be sort of inconvenient if I just jumped out of the shadows and stood right next to her.Antoinette remarked, "You're very bad at traveling light, Alina ."Don't I know it? She puffed. "I've been hauling this stupid bag since London." "What do you even have here? "Important things. Books and warm clothes, pencils, and paper—I cut it down, you know?"But I can't

leave these behind." Antoinette lightly nudged Erik, saying, Perhaps you should let Erik help you. He won't mind." She got annoyed glares from both of them in return. "I can carry this." "Quiet, dear. It'snot astrongcompetition. Be reasonable."Alina sighed, looking at Erik, who shrugged indifferently. "Asyoulike." She offered him the handle of her bag. "If it's not a problem, thank you. My arms hurt." "It's heavy, he thought as he took it. Did she drag it from London? The silence felt strange as they walked back to the room, so Antoinette started a conversation, having little faith in the social skills of her two young friends.
„Which books?",„Pardon me?""What kind of books did you bring, Alina? "Oh, fiction. to pass the time on the ship. I brought Austen, Twain, and Wilde. Poe, that kind of thing: ones you can reread without being bored." "I do remember you liked Jane Austen." I blame her for giving me a romanticized view of England when I was a girl. "I should have been reading Dickens instead; perhaps I would have made better life choices." Antoinette laughed. "YoushouldreadLesMisérables." "To make you less sad about leaving." "Oh,Ihave." "IfoundanEnglishtranslation It's here as well, just in case we get homesick." "I wish you had brought fewer books right now," Erik added behind them. "Oh,sorry. Butthey'reforyoutoo. Reading is a good way to learn a language. "Especially since you have me here to translate things if needed, she said. "Speakingisaproblem." "Oh, well, I can help with that as well." "Are you certain I'll have time to speak next to you? "She turned to give him an offended look while Antoinette laughed again next to her.As they entered the small room, Alina looked around nervously. She took off her furry hat, revealing frizzy hair beneath it. She tried, to no avail, to fix it with her hands before giving up. "I, uh, can we make some tea?" I'm cold.""Of course, Antoinette said, take off your coats; I'll heat some water."Erik decided this was a good time to excuse himself and go do something else.There were suddenly three of them, and it was making him uncomfortable.He started wondering if he could lock himself in the bathroom and sleep on the floor for lack of a better option.But before he could say anything, Alina spoke
again."I, uh, actually have an announcement." Yesterday was my birthday, and I made some cakes, and I was hoping we could have them with tea, I mean, if you both want, but I haven't celebrated it at all this year, and I made these myself because I thought I'd treat you," she turned red. "I mean, yes, there's cake and sugar cookies. For everyone.

That is al That was the announcement."It's your birthday!" Happy birthday! " Antoinette exclaimed. "Of course, we'll celebrate!""Happy birthday, Erik added, wondering if this meant he couldn't leave yet. "Thank you both." "How old are you now?" "Twenty-five?" Antoinette asked. "Yes," she nodded. "It sounds so strange, I know." "I thought I'd be more mature by now." "You look younger, Erik offered, trying to be civil. She did look younger than she was, especially when she was blushing like that.Perhaps I'm already at an age where that's a good thing. "How old are you, anyway, if I may ask?" She looked at him."You may, but I don't know." Less than thirty Twenty-seven, perhaps.He could see she was curious, but she didn't ask any further, afraid she would offend him. Wise choice. It's a box she doesn't want to open. She gave him a small shrug."Perhaps it's better not to know." That way, you can stay around twenty-seven for a decade.He started smiling before he noticed it and decided that maybe he could have some tea.Alina decided she could maybe get along with Erik. She couldn't at all figure out what he was like as a person, but it seemed to her like he wouldn't be boring, at least.The ship would leave the next morning at dawn. Alina slept on the bed, taking turns with Antoinette; both of them got only a few hours of sleep anyway.They passed the time playing cards and talking; Erik couldn't sleep at all and instead sat next to the window.This was the last night he would spend in France, and he could not wait to put the entire Atlantic Ocean between himself and this land.Except whenever he looked at Anne, he felt a familiar tug of sadness.He needed to tell her some things. She deserved to hear them. He tried writing them down, but they all sounded ridiculous to him; he would have to improvise.They got up well before dawn so that they could get on the ship while it was still dark. They were not the only ones; aside from being a cargo ship, this one also took passengers with low enough standards who wished to get to New York cheaply. A dozen or so people, aside from the sailing crew, seemed to be traveling with them."Oh, I almost forgot." "I've told them you're brother and sister," Antoinette said"It'll make them less suspiciou You also get a little space under the deck to sleep.It's not very proper and not very luxurious, but you'll get some privacy. The entire ship

is quite improper and cramped. "This is the best I can do.""That's more than I was hoping for, Alina said. "The ship is rather small, but it looks safe."Antoinette stayed for a moment to say her goodbyes, and Alina pulled a letter out of her pocket."Can you please send this to me? "

It's for my mother. "I'd rather she gets it after I've already sailed.",,Of course.""And, Teta Giry, thank you for everything." She walked up to her and embraced her. "Ill miss you terribly." I'll write you a letter every week; you'll grow sick of them.""Be sure to write at least once.""I'd like to know you're safe."She nodded, looking at Erik and then at Antoinette again."I'll, uh, go on to leave my things and find that room." I'll wait for you there, she said, hurriedly climbing onto the ship.They were alone now.Erik's mind was blank as he turned to her and opened his mouth. Antoinette looked at him with a smile."It's alright, my boy.""No, I want to tell you—" he started to panic quietly."It is alright." I know."NO! I want to say this! " Three people turned to look at them, and he remembered to lower his voice. "I want to say it before we leave because I won't be returning, he said, taking a deep breath. "Antoinette, you deserve to be made into a saint." I owe you everything. You have been asking, "Why is it suddenly harder to speak?" You have been like a mother to me. It's because of you that I'm alive, and it's because of you that I have come to somewhat resemble a human being. I'll never forget it. "I'll never be able to repay you for this, and I'll spend my life trying to earn it." She embraced him for a moment. "I love you too, my dear." Erik could do nothing but stare at the floor. "You need to go now," she said, letting go. Erik nodded, turning toward the ship. ,,And, Erik?",,Yes?""Take care of Alina for me, will you?"She's not as tough as she likes to think.He nodded once again. ,,Alright."Alina was already standing on the deck, pretending to look in the opposite direction.ooooooo

him food, as he seemed absolutely against the prospect of going to eat meals with everyone else, but he was still mostly sick and rarely accepted it. He seemed to be downright miserable. "I feel like I'm intruding just by being on the same vessel, Alina thought.She was not entirely sure how to start conversations with Erik because he looked like he would much rather be left alone, but something in her made it very hard to leave someone alone who looked so miserable.She talked very little at first and would drop the subject if he kept quiet.Erik made no real effort to strike up a conversation with her, being distracted and withdrawn, but it seemed that every now and then, something she said would spark interest in him, and he'd say a few sentences before drifting away again."Do you like Poe?" Alina asked one day, sitting on the floor a few feet away from him, taking out an orange she brought with her from the land and some half-dry bread and cheese. He was nearly finished with Poe, and she couldn't wait for him to finish each new book so they would have something to talk about, seeing as he was so adamant not to discuss anything from his own life and never asked her anything about hers. "I do." "What's your favorite story so far?"She asked, peeling the orange." "The one where the rich and nobles all died, he said honestly. Alina looked at him silently for a moment before letting out a surprised laugh. "That's a... that's one way to put it, yes."

"My English teacher would have loved you." She snickered a bit more, and Erik felt himself relax slightly."Maybe you'll read Pride and Prejudice next?" She asked when he didn't elaborate further.She was dying to hear what he'd have to say about that one.„No." „No." He wouldn't have known—he read it years ago in French—but she didn't need to know that.

„You should. "It's quite good." Alina split the orange and offered him half, saying, These grow in my homeland." "They're very sweet."He shook his head at her, refusing. Someone else might have felt inclined to ask where that homeland was, but he realized it a little too late."I strongly suggest you eat something, Alina smiled, eating the other half. "I wouldn't want you to die of starvation before we arrive." Or, you know, scurvy. "Hence the oranges." "I don't actually like eating, he managed through his teeth, looking at his book in an attempt not to seem rude in front of others.

She blinked. Well, what a coincidence, she said, wiping her hands and getting up. "I was just heading out for a short walk, so you can have all the privacy you'd like. I'll be back soon." She passed him, leaving quickly through the door. The room seemed somehow colder suddenly.Erik stared stubbornly at one-half of an orange, and the sandwiches were suspiciously close to him before he sighed and took some.She wasn't lying, he thought. They are very sweet.The sea was not being very kind to them. Alina had been on her fair share of ships by now, so it bothered her less. On the worst days, she would just stay in bed and not even try to do anything.On the better days, like this one, she tried to get out and read or stare at the sea—to at least get some fresh air and stretch her legs. She sat in her favorite spot on the deck and looked at the waves. The sea seemed very scary and captivating.It made her feel very small and very alone.A few days later, after a few failed attempts to talk him into reading Pride and Prejudice, Alina decided to give Erik her precious, treasured copy of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer.It was smart and funny, deep, and all around the most beautiful book Alina possessed. She'd had it for several years now, and it was worn from repeated reading.She could tell that he loved it. He read it twice, from cover to cover, before returning it: "Did you like it?",,I did. There's something special about it. He thought about it some more. It's... I don't know; one just feels glad to be alive while reading it." "I agree." She gave him the widest, most genuine smile he'd ever seen on her. He wondered for a second if he could maybe make her do that again.ooooooo

realized that my life looked nothing like what I had imagined.And that my parents, my friends, almost everyone, thinks I'm incredibly strange.Even though they all have conflicting views on what strange and normal mean, they probably all agree that I'm strange. "So I got drunk off of rum." He turned his head toward her. „That's it?"„No, no. When I got drunk, I realized I wasn't sad about being disappointed any longer. I mean, I felt this sadness not because I had given up on pleasing them but only because I thought I should, like an anchor in life. I was happy that I'm living a very strange life because it's my own and I feel freer than before.All of my mistakes are mine, and I'm not constrained by expectations like I've been most of my life. And I don't even believe in their conceptions of strange and normal any longer, nor do I care. I'll die alone with seventeen cats, having raised a hundred thousand orphans. I don't care. Everyone should live their lives as they please, as long as they're not harming anyone.That's it.

"It's a strangely comforting feeling."She couldn't tell what he was thinking through the damned mask.ooooooo

and slapping her hand off of him. "Letmego!"
"Alright.""And stop staring at me!"I'm not a woman! "You think I can't tell by now when someone's staring at me? "Fair enough," she realized, "I should have left him alone. But she was getting angry now and was not awake yet to put a filter on her mouth. "What is your problem?"I'm just asking if you're okay! "I don't need your precious sympathy or your pompous self-righteousness! Leave me—the hell—alone! That, Alina felt, was uncalled for. She slid off the bed and got her coat, deciding it was time to get out of there." You think I can't tell by now when someone is yelling at me for no good reason?"I'll leave you alone if you want, but there's no need to treat me like garbage when I try to help! Bigger and scarier men than you have screamed worse things at me, and I've just about had enough!" "Have a nice night with the whole room to yourself! "She slammed the door behind her, starting to cry as soon as she got outside, fully aware of why she was upset and why it only partially had to do with him. I did not handle this well.They avoided each other for the next couple of
days.ooooooo

from war, and she lied without missing a beat." "Seems like that kind of fellow." "Yeah. I'mjumpymyself,though. "He yelled at me, and I didn't take it well." "That'sabadcombination." "Iknow." He thought about it for a bit." Mypop'sthesame." "He's been jumpy for years since he came home from one too many sea storms." "I'msorry." "No, I mean, my point is, Mom almost left him; it drove her crazy, yeah." She says something, he starts to yell, and everything goes to sh*t. They both hated each other later. "Pophatestoo." "You think that'll happen to us too? "Alinaasked,growingupset." No,no,listen." One day, Pop says to Mary, Listen, I'll admit I'm a bit of an idiot, alright?"? But sometimes I lose myself. And you're not new to these battles; you know, I've never lost myself before.And she says, Well, what do you want me to do? "And he says, Just don't scream because it messes with me, alright?" And she says, "But you scream first, and he says, Yeah, but if you don't scream back and startle me, Mary, I promise I'll gather myself and stop." And so they try that." "Does it work?"Yeah, it works." Because they love each other despite something terrible, they both try to be patient, and they don't let each other hate themselves.It wouldn't work if they weren't both like that. "Alina is biting her lip, feeling guilty again. "But what if your dad didn't back down?" just kept yelling after she went in?""Well, then it wouldn't be the same thing, yeah?"Thenhe'd beanarsehole. Some people are like that —the better you treat them, the worse they get.butnotmypop. If he was like that, I'd tell her to leave him alone." Truth be told, she couldn't leave for a few more weeks."Yourbrotherdoesn'tseemlikethearseholekind." It made him angry at first; he couldn't believe she'd humiliate him like that and then just draw him into herself—no, he actually could because everything about this situation felt familiar somehow.After the initial wave of anger passed, he tried to think about it. He had to do something about this. He couldn't keep going in the same circles all his life. He tried to think about it objectively.I can't think about it objectively. If I try, I just hate myself.This woman doesn't know me. She has no idea with whom she's dealing.Maybe she was just trying to help. But does she have to be so nosy and reckless? And I am so controlled and dependable? I don't go around poking into her business! Because I don't give a damn what happens to anyone but myself, but she does. When was the last time I gave a damn about anyone but myself? How did that feel? Exposed? Vulnerable? like tapping in the dark, not knowing what I'm doing? That was different. She doesn't care

personally; she just has a deal with Antoinette.Then why is she acting like this? She just has to make sure I get there alive.Everything else she does is because... What would I think if this were about someone else? that she's trying to be my friend? Ridiculous....is it?
Besides, she insulted me too.I insulted her first.
I insulted her first. She was hurt. She's not that good of an actress. That's not yet certain.He remembered Antoinette's parting words. Cursing under his breath, he went looking for her.He found her talking to the young sailor boy, the one with the pretty face who couldn't whistle in tune to save his soul.That was new. They were talking, occasionally bursting into cheerful laughter. "No, no, no!" See, when she says she doesn't care, but she's all angry like that, she cares! You don't go telling her something like that! You tell her that you DO love her instead!"Alina waved one of her hands in the air while leaning her face on the other, half-frustrated and half-amused." But you can't keep Lady if you're so clingy! "

Desmond replied, pointing his finger at her."Not clingy, no! But you can't keep a lady if you're so distant and unemotional, either!You have to be on equal ground, not with one of you always having one foot out the door! "She'll just find someone else if she thinks you don't like her enough, at least if she respects herself in the slightest." If you're so smart, why don't you write her a letter instead of me? "With those fancy words?" He started to laugh.Do you want me to? "I bet I'd write her such an amazing letter that she'd marry you right away!" She leaned toward him, laughing as well. "I bet I can woo your lady, Desmond!" "Woo, maybe, but you still don't have one thing I have that she likes." They were both roaring with laughter now. The scene was adorable, Erik had to admit. He felt like he was seeing something he was not supposed to see.But then she looked up and noticed him, her face getting serious again.Desmond saved him, the clever little sh*t. "Oy, tall man, big brother, I need your advice too!" "Your sister here has some outrageous ideas!" "I agree with Desmond." "You're talking nonsense." "Yeah, it's two against one!" "The people have spoken!" "Desmond spread out his arms." "Lass-wooing is science, you idiots, not democracy!" "She started laughing again.Desmond winked at Erik, and he started to smile against his will as well. This was ridiculous. "Well, if you'll excuse me now, ladies and gentlemen, he told them, the captain will have my head if I don't go to work right this instant.He gave them a mock salute and then promptly left. "I'm starting to like this kid," Erik decided. "I've

been meaning to talk to you," he started slowly, looking ahead of him. "Same," she admitted."Ladies first?"He offered." Do you take me for an idiot? "Erik knew a rhetorical question when he heard one." "Very well," I screamed at you, but you were just trying to help," he said slowly. "That's what you did." But I was irrational too, I think.I shouldn't have said those things. She said, All in one quick breath." She seemed honest. "Me too," he nodded. "We both hate it when people yell at us, don't we?" she said. "And we hate being caught off guard." Let's just agree not to do that from now on. "Just be more careful.",,I agree."Erik could swear he could feel Desmond winking again somewhere.ooooooo

even though she made it sound so simple. He swallowed his pride and sought her out again in their little cabin on the lower deck."Of course, I'll help you with it! " "I'm coming right away! " She said this as she left the room. She didn't mock him this time and instead spent an entire afternoon composing the stupid letter with him until every word was carefully chosen and placed. She might be right about Vanessa marrying him immediately after she reads it. If he were her, he'd have married himself already, although that would be impossible because neither Desmond in that scenario would want to propose first.The trip was approaching its long-awaited end when Desmond heard something that made him get out of his position as a comfortable observer.He heard other sailors say how they had to stop at Ellis Island so that the police could search the cargo and passengers. Already? He thought they had more time. Are we ahead of schedule for once?"Your little lady friend doesn't have to worry, Desmond; they're sure to let her in," one of the other sailors told him. "But I'm not so sure about that eerie, masked fellow hiding in the lower deck."There was only one eerie masked fellow on the ship, and Desmond had already started seeing him and his lady friend as his pets. He didn't want them to get separated and sent away, and he'd much prefer if she wasn't crying all alone in a foreign land the last time he saw her.That's alright. He was much better at conspiracies and mischief than writing love letters.He went to seek her out again and found her outside this time, staring at the sea as she often did.People get so wonky on these trips. She was not nearly the first one that he'd found doing that."Your brother, why does he wear that mask? "He asked quietly, sitting next to her.She looked at him in pure horror, opened her mouth, and closed it again. "It's alright; I know he's not your brother." But we're stopping at Ellis Island tomorrow. They'll sort you all out, but they'll send back people they don't like. "Criminals, sick people, disabled, disfigured. "That kind of thing." "Is she going to cry now?"I like you a lot, and you have helped me a great deal, so I'll try to help you." I can get you past Ellis Island on a lifeboat tonight.But I can't guarantee exactly where we'll end up, and you have to do exactly as I say or you'll get caught and I'll be dead meat.
"She nodded. "We can.""Great. I'll tell you the plan now, and you should do it when that old man Tim gets the night shift because he always falls asleep at the same time. Tell your brother. "Pack up before, but try to do it so it's not suspicious." She went to tell the masked man, but they

couldn't find him, and even though she went mad with worry, they wouldn't find him until nightfall.And after nightfall, they found the absolute madman trying to jump over the ship's fence with nothing but an old life belt to better his chances. in the Atlantic, in the middle of February.Alina panicked; she couldn't react in time. But Desmond was a sailor; he was strong and fast and afraid of nothing, so he ran and grabbed the man around his chest from behind, unceremoniously throwing him onto the ship again.The fellow got up remarkably fast, as Desmond noticed.There was murder in his eyes when he looked at Desmond, and Desmond thought there might be some things left in this world that he was, in fact, afraid of. "Sorry! I didn't mean to do that! I just didn't want you to die!" Even if you survive the fall, the sea is freezing!"Desmond explained that he was panicking.What followed was one of the strangest conversations he had ever witnessed.The masked man turned to Alina. "We had a deal!

You promised! He hissed, pointing a finger at her. "I was trying to fulfill that promise just before I found you breaking yours!" She was whispering frantically and waving her hands in obvious distress. "The ship is going to be searched tomorrow, and do you know what they're going to find?" Can you guess who's not going to pass their inspection?It's okay that you've found a way to take care of yourself, but I'll do it too, and you can't stop me! "I meant what I said! "This was the most Desmond had ever heard him speak. He looked really upset. "I was trying to," she started, but Desmond knew how to talk to people like him, and so he interrupted, talking as calmly as possible with his hands up in a very peaceful gesture. "We've made a plan for you to escape." Both of you Your sister doesn't have to, but she's decided to follow you anyway. "We wanted to tell you all day, but you disappeared." The fellow looked at her like he was shocked when Desmond said she was going with him willingly.

Alina still looked hurt and afraid. brother and sister. Right. "Well, hurry already!" Get your things; we have a boat to borrow before they catch us.

Chapter 3: Burials

As they finally reached the shore, Alina turned around toward the young sailor boy and smiled at him with genuine gratitude. For a moment, Erik thought she looked like a little girl again.

„Thank you, Desmond. I will never forget this. You deserve all the happiness in the world."
The boy fumbled for a moment, blushing. Something about the scene gave Erik a bitter taste in his mouth. A memory floated to the surface, one he refused to think about, and he pushed it back down immediately.
Desmond threw the two bags toward them. „You need to hurry before you get caught. I'd be pissed if you wasted this chance, now that I've paddled your asses all the way here."
She was still laughing as they jumped to the shore, holding their bags and slipping on the wet sand. It shocked Erik to find out that the earth doesn't sway like the ship deck. It was incredibly strange to feel firm soil beneath his feet again; they both stumbled for a bit before finding balance again.
Alina turned around to wave at the boy rowing back and Erik lifted his head to look at their surroundings.
The beach was very still and very, very quiet. The surrounding ground was covered in pristine, white snow, and the night sky above them was specked with clouds and stars. Further down there was a village, illuminated by moonlight and dim streetlamps. He could barely make out muffled voices in the distance. For all it was worth, it was a beautiful scene.

Alina seemed to notice that as well, as she silently stood next to Erik. The wind was blowing flyaway strands of hair around her now pale and frostbitten face.

„You know", she said quietly, „it's just occurred to me that I've never in fact been this far from home. We're completely alone here."

„You can go back if you wish." She's not exactly stuck here, unlike me. And I'm not forcing her to stay.
She gave him one of the sideways glares she liked to throw at him occasionally.
„Wasn't planning to."
„Your choice", he shrugged.
„My point was, Erik, that we know absolutely no one here save for each other. And now that we're here alive and free, you can see I do keep my promises. If we are to survive this crusty godforsaken dump of an island we'd be better off trusting each other at least a little and not running off randomly at the first sign of trouble, I think."
„Island?"
„Yes, well, according to what I know, this is Coney Island. Welcome to America."
„Hm." She was right, of course, he thought. She had done everything as she'd promised. Something prevented him from admitting it out loud. He hadn't yet decided if she was just much more manipulative than he had anticipated. Even if she wasn't, agreeing to trust her felt somewhat like... (defeat? compliance to a master? that's ridiculous), and was not about to grant her that kind of power.
Thankfully, she rolled her eyes and let the matter go.
„Let's find someplace warm. There's nothing to do here."
They started walking slowly, carefully towards the lights. The snow creaked beneath their boots, breaking the otherwise deafening silence. Alina looked ahead of her with a frown on her face, her shoulders slouching beneath her heavy bag.

For whatever reason, Erik suddenly changed his mind at that moment. Reaching out, he took the bag from her and put it on his own back; she gave him a confused look but allowed it anyway.
„You did keep your promise. Thank you", he said looking ahead of him.
The confused look spread slowly into a smile as they continued walking in silence.

OOO

Her idea of "someplace warm" seemed to be the small campfire with people huddled around it. They look just as lost as we are, Erik thought. They were refugees, he realized. Outcasts. He assumed they also arrived by unconventional means, judging by the worried faces, the old, dirty clothes, and the amount of visibly sick people.
"Not." He stopped, still at the safe distance from the light of the fire.
She stopped as well and turned to him. "Why?"
"I hate fire. And people."
"Yes, me too. But are you familiar with the phrase dying of exposure to the elements?" she spread out her arms in frustration.
"No."
"It's a fancy way of saying Mother Nature kicked you in the head, and you died."
"Ah."
"Seems even less appealing."
He thought about it. This was a smart choice of shelter. While they did have some means to survive, and could probably manage one night in a cheap room somewhere less crowded, they were probably least likely to be kicked out by other people who also shouldn't be there. He could maybe survive out in the cold for now, but he wasn't so sure about her. She squinted at him expectantly, probably guessing what he was thinking about.
I suppose she's right. I'll have to endure it. He put the hood of his cloak over his head as if that was going to make a goddamn difference.
"Alright."
She walked towards the crowd with feigned confidence and stepped into the circle of light illuminated by the fire. Everyone gawked at them, and Erik started panicking silently.
Alina bowed her head slightly and gave them a shy smile.
"Can we sit with you?"
They just kept staring. Someone said something in a language Erik couldn't understand, and he braced himself to start running, but her eyes suddenly widened, and she replied similarly.
"Dobro veče. Smijemo sjesti s vama?"
They relaxed visibly. Erik didn't. One of the men gestured for them to sit down and join them.
Alina looked around and picked a place on the ground, next to a very young, very tired-looking woman with a child that looked to be about two

years old. Their hair was the same pale blonde color. Erik sat quietly to Alina's left.
The boy stopped his quiet whining to stare at them. Alina grimaced at him, and he opened his mouth in shock for a moment before starting to giggle.
Children make no sense to me sometimes, Erik thought to himself.
The mother started talking to Alina in that same language Erik didn't understand. Alina didn't fully understand it either, as their conversation was speckled with nervous laughter, a lot of gesturing, and head-scratching. But they seemed to understand each other well enough. These people were probably Russian, Erik realized. But Alina wasn't.
What did she tell them?
And why did all these people seem to understand each other? What was this pack mentality that they all had? If this was a huddle of Frenchmen, Erik was quite sure they would not have been so welcoming just because he spoke to them in something resembling French.
In any case, for the moment the danger had passed.
As Alina talked to the young Russian girl, Erik noticed his hands were still shaking, which he'd rather not let them see. The people around them were still throwing sideways glances at him when they thought he wouldn't notice. He needed something to occupy himself with.
He grabbed a small flat piece of wood, slowly took out his pocket knife, and started carving. They were on edge when they saw the knife, but no one said anything. Alina didn't notice, as she was busy talking to the traumatized-looking girl.
Alina smiled politely at the girl and asked her,
"Krasan dječak. Vaš sin?"
Yana didn't understand why the woman would tell her that her son is "red" so she chalked it up to translation errors. She meant 'lovely'. Oh. Yana didn't trust noblewomen, but she found herself talking to that strange woman who addressed her with the formal "you" for some reason. She hadn't had anyone to talk to in ages, she realized; seeing as she was naturally quiet and withdrawn people usually talked at her and didn't ask her that many questions. This woman seemed interested with her eyes smiling with kindness. So she told her about herself.

OOO

Her whole life, Yana had been a good girl. She was born into a large family in a small village in Russia, a small, meek girl with pale eyes and even paler hair. When she was a little girl, the other villagers called her "rusalka", a water nymph. The small secluded village had kept its traditions and folklore and so the name came without the negative connotations; she thought it was rather fitting. She had always felt a kind of melancholy in her heart that made it easy for her to believe she had the soul of some unfortunate dead woman inside her. She was also, fittingly, very reluctant to leave the comfort of her habitat. She was the smallest, quietest girl, and she spent most of her time helping her mother. Other children played in the fields and took care of the animals, but her mother kept her close, claiming she was a gentle soul, afraid to let her come to any harm. It was painful for her to remember her mother these days.
When Yana grew up, she noticed village boys throwing glances at her. Maybe they were just curious, seeing as she was somewhat strange.
Her mother sat her down one day.
"Yana, you've become beautiful."
She tried to brush it off. These things didn't interest her.
"But they will interest you. And I think it's time I tell you this. You are a beautiful girl, and the boys will start flocking to you. You are kind and patient, and very skilled at cooking. You would make a good wife."
Did her mother want her to get married?
"Not yet. I am telling you this for the future. The boys will tell you nice things, and they will want some things from you. I'm telling you this, so you would know: be smart, and patient, as you always have been. Keep your heart locked until you find a boy who deserves it. When you find a boy you can talk to the same way you talk to me, then you can unlock it."
That seemed unreasonable. The sooner she got married, the sooner her parents would have one less mouth to feed.

"Forget about that. You are not hard to feed. Do as I said."
So she did.
One day a new boy, Mikita, came to the village. With green eyes and dark hair, and long, gentle fingers. He was a musician, and the only thing of value he had been an old violin. He played it like it was an extension of his own heart, and something about him made Yana want to tell him all of her secrets. He played it under her window for many nights, quietly, until

Yana's mother promptly shooed him off with a broom.
It was too late. Yana had already decided.
They got married properly, and even though her father looked concerned, her mother was smiling happily. Yana silently thanked her for her advice. The boy kept smiling and playing the violin as they built a small house at the end of the village. He was gentle. He was kind. They both didn't talk much, but Yana didn't think that was a problem, as her childhood friends talked a great deal with their husbands but managed to say very little.
They were very happy for a time; Yana found out she was pregnant and several months later gave birth to a baby boy, healthy, with the same pale hair and sad eyes as hers. She called him Piotr, after her father. They now had more mouths to feed, so Mikita found honest work with the local noble, but still played violin every evening for her.
Yana paused. She didn't want to tell this part of the story, but the woman kept smiling and nodding at her with sympathetic eyes, asking questions about her husband and Russia, and Yana didn't want to give her the wrong idea and have to explain the whole story later in the future.
Piotr was still a baby when Mikita died. The sickness took away his lungs and then his life. The noble he worked for didn't pay for a doctor, but he paid for the funeral.
Yana buried him along with a part of her heart in the small cemetery behind the church; deciding to remember him as the boy with sparkling eyes and a violin, rather than the pale sweating shell he was by the end. As she went home, the house is suddenly silent, too silent, unbearably silent. She felt like she could explode. How was she going to live now? Mikita didn't leave much behind. She couldn't go back to her parents; they had too much on their minds and not enough on their plates. Everywhere she looked, all she could see was his face.
For the first time in her life, Yana decided not to be a good timid girl.
So she sold her house and everything she owned except for one bag of clothes and Mikita's old violin and decided to travel somewhere with Piotr where she would have enough to eat and where young strong men didn't die routinely of diseases they contracted doing nothing particularly dangerous.
The trip was hard. She'd rather not remember it. But she's always been good at hiding, and so she evaded whatever unnecessary hardships she could. She glossed over that part, and Alina didn't insist on any details, thankfully.
The conversation was turning more serious, Erik thought, judging by the

looks on their faces. Alina spoke less and less and mostly nodded. Erik still couldn't understand anything, so he turned his attention to the piece of wood in his hands and after some time, it started to resemble a shape.
Yana had no money when she arrived and no papers, but the man on Ellis Island with a kind smile looked at her pretty face and happy boy and decided to let her in. He told her she reminded him of his daughter. So she settled in a Russian immigrant village on Coney Island, rather than going to the city itself. She preferred it that way. These people looked and sounded more familiar, and appreciated her cooking.

They were telling stories by the fire to keep their minds off of winter when the strange pair joined them. The woman was polite, and talked in a language that isn't complete nonsense; so they let them join. Yana decided not to ask them too much about them for now and kept her conclusions to herself.
The woman was dressed simply and smiling shyly, but she didn't fool Yana for one second. The way she kept her spine straight and her feet slightly apart gave away that she was used to having enough to eat and people who listened when she talked. The man behind her was a different story entirely. He wore a white mask and stood stiff as a board, and the men were unnerved when they saw him. Yana feared him because he looked like a criminal. But she could see in his eyes the same fear she saw when she looked at her reflection in the shop windows.
Yana noticed the strange man was slightly shaking the whole time; she felt bad for him. In an attempt to hide it, he took a piece of wood lying around the fire and starts carving into it. She noticed his leather-covered hands looked surprisingly gentle, with long fingers that reminded her of Mikita. They grew silent around the time Erik finished carving.
It's a very simple, but still recognizable figurine of a horse. Not exactly three-dimensional, but Erik wasn't aiming for artistry anyway. Piotr was staring at it with interest.
Erik extended his hand and offered the bear to him. Yana clutched him more tightly, but Piotr, who had always been the complete opposite of his mother when it comes to shyness reached out and grabbed it anyway, laughing with excitement.
Yana smiled and wanted to thank him as well, but the man didn't look at her. Instead, he cast a quick, barely noticeable glance towards the woman he

came with. He was waiting to see her reaction but didn't want her to know that.
Alina looked at him as if he had just grown a halo and a pair of wings right before her eyes.
I could get used to that, he thought.
Something clicked in Yana's mind, and she decided to remember it for later.

Ooo

As the night went on, the other villagers left the campfire to go to sleep – Erik noticed they did have roofs over their heads; tiny cottages and houses that sometimes held more people than he thought reasonable. The two of them had no place to sleep, so Alina asked the young woman what they could do, and she got up, walked over, and started talking to one of the men quietly. He frowned and looked at them with suspicion, but the woman stared at him quietly and stubbornly, repeating the same few sentences. He shrugged and waved his hand, giving her the international „do whatever you want" gesture, and she walked back over to them. She tried to explain to Alina what he said, but it took her a while. Erik felt exhausted, overwhelmed, and altogether eager to get out of there when Alina thanked the woman and turned to him.
„There is a cottage next to hers that nobody lives in. If we can fix it, they say we can stay there. For tonight, they'll give us some blankets, and we can sleep in her kitchen. That man said he would come by in the morning to check if everything was fine." Yana asked him to come by and check for her own sake more than theirs, but they didn't need to know that.
„Oh." This was a pleasant surprise for Erik. „Good."
„Do you know how to fix a roof and rebuild a house?" she raised her eyebrows.
„Yes, of course, I do", he shrugged. It wasn't his first time. „Is that what she was saying to that man? She talked him into giving us a house?"
„From what I've gathered, yes", Alina nodded.
„How do I say thank you in Russian?" he asked. Alina turned to the woman automatically, opening her mouth, but he tapped her shoulder lightly with his finger to stop her. „Wait."
„Yes?" she turned back.
„Tell me how to say it, so I can tell her myself."

She blinked. „Alright. From what I've picked up, the word is spasiba."
He looked directly at her for the first time and repeated the word as closely as he could, and the woman nodded at him silently.
Later, as they lay wrapped in blankets on Yana's kitchen floor, Alina informed Erik about their names and what she managed to understand from Yana's story. They thanked him for the toy, she said.
"I thought you might want to know", she whispered, "What you did was nice. Her husband died back in Russia. She's all alone here with the boy. I felt bad, they've been through a lot", she told him with her eyes slightly glistening. She never really got used to tragedy after all these years; it still shook her to hear people's stories every time. She wondered if it might have been better if she learned to toughen up.
"How do you get people to tell you such personal stories?"
"Uh... I find the ones who want to talk and ask them questions."
"Is that it?"
"No", Alina frowned, "I suppose that's not it. I don't ask too much, so they don't feel threatened. And I listen a lot. I try to show them I care for what they say. And I tell them things about me, too, so that they feel on equal ground."
Erik decided to remember that, just in case he felt the need to talk to someone for whatever reason. He was surprised she gave him an honest answer to that question - and, in retrospect, some of her behavior was starting to make sense.
"I thought you said you hate people?"
"No, I don't hate people", she admitted. "I wouldn't bother doing what I do otherwise. But people make me nervous. Afraid, sometimes. It makes me feel better to just curse and say I hate everything."
He could understand that, but it still bothered him.
"Why?"
"Why?" She repeated, surprised. "Don't you feel the same way?"
"I do, but-" Did I just admit that out loud? She's good.
"Well, that's why."
"It's not the same-"
"Yes, I know. But it feels similar, though probably much less intense. A lot of people feel that way."
She paused to look at him, suddenly alarmed when she realized what she'd said.

"I mean, I don't know what happened in your life, and I don't mean to diminish it, or say it's the same, by any means. I'm just saying we're all a bit messed up like that. I feel better when I know others are just as scared around me as I am around them."
It made him feel the opposite of better.
She looked even more alarmed as she realized it, her face red with embarrassment, and opened her mouth again. Erik decided to stop her before it had a chance to intensify further.
"It's fine, I understood."
Alina felt half relieved, half ready to throw herself off a cliff.
Erik enjoyed it just a bit. She seems less manipulative for a moment, and more relatable. Likable, even, for God's sake.
Deciding he let her suffer long enough, he pulled a small wooden bear out of his pocket.
"You can give this one to Piotr as well."

OOO

A few days passed. They let them stay in their makeshift village as promised, in the tiny cottage next to Yana's. Nobody cared that they lived together in it; they just built houses and put people in them that could stand each other. Many people had started living together just because they had arrived together and knew no one else. Erik didn't care either, he was not in a position to argue and he just survived four weeks with Alina in a tight space; she wasn't all that bothered by his presence anymore. It didn't take him all that long to fix the roof and make the house good enough to live in, since he had no other job so far, unlike the other villagers. They moved in as soon as they could and agreed to make a wooden wall in the middle of the room to make a makeshift kitchen and two tiny separated spaces to sleep in because they could both agree that they'd need some privacy so they wouldn't strangle each other. They were both mostly out of the house during the day, sometimes doing chores around the village and sometimes walking together and trying to think of a plan to make money.

Alina asked the other villagers what they could do, and there was plenty to do, it turned out. She helped cook and take care of the children, and seemed to get along fine with the other women – and occasionally, they would both

be asked to help with reading and writing letters or legal documents, which they obliged, and it significantly increased their social standing. The villagers were otherwise not too sure what to do about Erik and he wasn't too sure what to tell them. In the end, he settled for chopping wood and doing similar solitary tasks. He was fine with it, and no one was volunteering to join him, but he fixed some of the other houses which made people a little less wary around him. He didn't mind doing physical work as it took his mind off of things and no one seemed to bother him for a change. Alina kept giving him more books and occasionally would come to discuss them in the evenings. Days turned into surprisingly peaceful weeks. The villagers didn't have a lot of money, but they traded food, clothes, and various supplies for the work Erik and Alina did and it was enough to keep them going. So far, they still had all of their savings. Nobody knew about it; they lived modestly and the villagers seemed to respect Alina's help with the children and Erik's competence at constructing various things - so they kept out of their business and they were both, surprisingly, quite sheltered and safe for the time being. Alina still made sure not to leave the house alone after sundown. It seemed like a smart idea. Erik kept working on the cottage, adding isolation from the cold, bolts on the doors, and various other things.

Alina spent her time talking to the kids and telling them wild stories; she taught some of them to read and write in English, and to do simple math. She told their parents it would help them get better jobs later, and they agreed if only to have some peace while the kids were with her. For all her talk of working with children, Erik could see it now for the first time. She was surprisingly strict – the kids were quite well-behaved after some time. Erik was not sure how she did it, because he rarely heard her raise her voice. Some of the parents told her to hit them if they misbehave, but she dismissed the idea with disgust, and Erik was quite sure she would have spiraled into one of her rants again if she thought they could understand her well enough (she still later told him all of her opinions about physical punishment being inexcusable, even though he never asked her). The children loved her, and they flocked to her whenever they saw her even if she was done for the day. Erik noticed over time that they started talking in English sometimes, and Alina began to learn Russian from them – her knowledge of the Cyrillic alphabet came in handy. She felt surprisingly

happy.
„Why did you leave? I thought you didn't like your past job." Erik asked one evening, realizing he had become dangerously accustomed to talking to her in the evenings.
„I liked the job. I was just ready for a change of scenery, I suppose", she smiled.
Alina sang to herself whenever she did chores. She wasn't particularly talented – she knew just enough about music for a school teacher – but it was still a pleasant sound. Erik never sang at all. He never even told her he could.

ooo

Alina rented a small box at the post office so she could send and receive letters. She sent one to auntie Giry every week; it had become a weekly routine to sit down on a Sunday evening to write it and send it every Monday morning.
„It's a small chance that she'll get any of these", Erik informed her.
„I know", she said. „That's why I'm writing so many."

A letter arrived one day, addressed to gđica Alina pl. Boričević.
Alina, I will murder you with my own bare hands. Love, Mama.
She found it extremely amusing, roaring with laughter as she showed it to him.
„She even wrote it in English", she managed through laughter. „That way, if it falls in the wrong hands or gets destroyed, someone can still inform me that she plans to kill me." She left to show the letter to Yana next door, and he could hear them laughing loudly outside.
A few days later, another one arrived, much longer and written in that same strange language. As she read it her face sunk and she got increasingly anxious, tapping her fingers and scratching her forearms. When she was done, she crumpled it up and threw it away.
„What does it say?" the worry in Erik's voice took him by surprise.
„My father is disappointed in me", she replied. „Surprisingly."
„By what, exactly?"
„I'd tell you, but it would take all day. It's hard to keep track at this point."

She spent the rest of the day in a foul mood. Erik decided it might be better to let it go.

ooo

That goddamned man can't let it go, Alina fumed.
She saw in his eyes when he looked at her that he was curious. She pretended not to notice, as she had become an expert in pretending not to notice things about him. He looked at her with curiosity for two entire days. Two. Entire. Days. His eyes followed her while she did chores. It was eating him alive. On the third day, while Alina was making breakfast, he broke and finally asked.
„Why is your father disappointed in you?"
Alina sighed. Of course, he would do it like this, clever bastard. She couldn't walk away from the fire while this oatmeal was cooking.
„Because I'm not what he needs me to be."
„Yes, obviously, I know what disappointed means."
„Why do you even want to know?", she asked looking at the bubbles forming in the pot. He hadn't asked her many personal questions since they left. She was pretty sure the only thing he knew about her was her name and age and whatever vague snippets of information she gives away while she was rambling. Huh. That's troubling. I ramble an enormous amount. I might have already given him my entire personal history without realizing it.
„Because I can't figure it out", he shrugged.
„Just pick one of the obvious things", she frowned at the bubbles in the oatmeal, even though they did nothing to deserve it.
„What obvious things? You are stubborn and brash and loud", ouch, „but that's no reason to be disappointed. Annoyed, maybe. But I can't see a single disappointing thing and I've known you for close to two months. If anything, I'd pick „pleasantly surprising" to describe you." He closed his mouth awkwardly, realizing he didn't mean to say that last part. „Besides, you've been sulking for two days straight since it arrived."
Alina sighed once again. She was, sadly, very susceptible to sweet-talking. She remembered that blasted green dress she bought because the man who sold it to her said her shoulders looked „enchanting" in it. It was on the bottom of her suitcase even now.
„Has auntie Giry told you anything about me?"

„Just that you lived in London but were from some other country."
„I'm from Croatia."
Of course, he doesn't know where that is, she sighed. „It's a part of the Austrian-Hungarian empire. The south part. Kraljevina Hrvatska I Slavonija. Ever heard of it?" She tried another approach. „Does the name Nikola Šubić Zrinski mean anything to you?"
„I've heard of an opera that sounded something like that- wait, that is your family?"
„No, no no. I meant the opera, it's Croatian. I just thought you might have heard of it since you mentioned liking opera."
„Who is your family, then?"
„My family is upper middle class with a useless noble title, so like all rich pretend nobles they like to dabble in politics." Oh well. „Croatia has been going through a kind of a renaissance for the past few decades. Our culture has been stifled for centuries by Austria and Hungary. They build schools for our children but demand we don't speak our language or call ourselves a nation. A great many people are angry about it, so there's a movement to bring our culture back. They want me to get involved in that. That's why they sent me off to London; they were hoping I'd get a proper education that wasn't in German or Hungarian, which I speak anyway, and come back as a proper heiress who would, I don't know, write patriotic books and go to tea parties with other intellectuals, and get married properly since they don't have any sons, only me and my sister."
„You have a sister?" he realized he never actually thought that much about the fact she had been alive for years before they met, and probably had an entire world of personal history. Did I simply forget to consider that she was an entire person besides the things that concerned me?
„Her name is Amelija. You'd like her. These hair pins are hers. But back to the point." She tapped the pins absentmindedly, taking another breath because the next part was harder.
„Anyway, I'm the firstborn, so I had to be a lady. Except I'm horrible at being a lady because as you said I'm loud, brash, and stubborn. I ran away all the time when my parents argued, and they used to argue a lot. They're very strict, and I'm very stubborn, so I got my fair share of beatings, manipulations, and threats. My father tried to instill this fear of him into me, hoping I'd fit the image he always had in his head of a smart, independent yet obedient daughter; but I just got more anxious and more

defiant at the same time. It all went horribly and we couldn't have a proper conversation amongst ourselves for years.
So, when I was eighteen they sent me to London and rented an apartment for me. They told me to find good tutors, get educated, and meet other intellectuals. They had some contacts there that I could talk to. So, I found some great teachers, I have to admit. I can't go to university for obvious reasons, but they were willing to give me books and they discussed them with me as you would with normal students. But my parents wanted me to study philosophy and politics, and that doesn't interest me in the slightest. I know what you're going to say, it's a noble cause they're after. I agree, and I support them. I'm simply the absolute worst person to get involved in it. Yes, I know how cowardly I am. It's my homeland. I think about it every day.
So I started lying to them. I studied pedagogy at first. Defectology. I stumbled on Freud's texts and became enchanted. All kinds of things. People's behavior. I draw, too, for fun. I love it a lot, even though Amelija is better at it. I can show you sometime. I studied the way people carry themselves and tried to conclude it. All very „young arrogant prodigal son" things, and everything except what my parents wanted me to do. Until, I one day went to a mental hospital to look for one of my tutors, the one who gave me the Freud book.
I realized that the world I'd seen so far was nothing like the world out there and that people were suffering in ways that I, in my sheltered little golden prison, could never have imagined. It humbled me and horrified me. I started volunteering there, then after a while, they gave me some small money for it because I took care of and talked to some patients no one had the patience to deal with anymore. I pulled everyone's sleeves to teach me how to talk to those people and help them. In the end, they got bored of me because I asked too many questions and I argued when I thought they were treating them badly – let me tell you, that was idiotic of me, never try to argue with a doctor of medicine - and I cry too much. Yes, I cried a lot. I wept like a useless heap in the broom closet every time something horrible happened. I stopped being useful, so they let me go, which I think was fair. But at the time I already had some small savings. And I was much more calculated and much less brash and stubborn.
And, to be fair", she swallowed in embarrassment, „I had finally got used to the fact people didn't listen to me all that much when they didn't know my

family name or have my father's money.
My parents looked forward to me finally snapping out of this strange phase and coming to my senses. Except I took my savings and rented a new, smaller apartment where they couldn't keep me on a leash made of money. I found work at a local orphanage, and surprisingly, I was neither useless nor obnoxious in that one. I was good at it, but over time it ate me alive. Orphanages are not nice places. I wanted to make some changes, to see that the kids get treated instead of punished because they all looked so worn down and traumatized to me. They didn't listen, but I was good at it so they didn't fire me either, so in twenty years perhaps I would've got to a position where I can make a difference.
Just when my parents were starting to feel alright with that, I sent them a letter saying I was going to America with you. And now they're furious because they've spent so much energy, time, and money to educate me, and now I'm doing my own will again. My father also has a specific way of putting things to make you feel like nothing. It's an art he's perfected.
So the answer to your question is, simply, I am a disappointment to my father because I'm not what he needs me to be."
The oatmeal is cooked, thank god. Alina needed something to do with her hands; she didn't feel good having told all of that. She grabbed some of it in a small bowl and started eating. He was watching her the whole time.
„Do you think you're a disappointment?" he asked. She couldn't tell what he thought about it all through the damn mask, and his flat tone frankly made her feel judged.
„I don't know", she shrugged. „Depends who you're asking."
„I'm asking you."
„I honestly don't know. Ask me in ten years."
„Very well", he said, getting up and getting his coat to leave, „I'm not a good moral compass to have, but I can tell you this: you're the only person Antoinette trusted sending with me, and I cannot say what would have happened to me if you hadn't been there. I'm now alive, free, and like I promised you, not harming anybody. Take of that what you will."

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Erik's hair had grown too long, but not long enough to be tied in any reasonable way. It bothered him, getting into his eyes and tangling up in the

strings of the mask, bothering him while he worked. For the first time in his life, he became actively thankful for the fact he couldn't grow a beard, because what a nuisance that would be. He had worn his hair long and tied away from his face for years, not caring about it (or so he claimed – the truth he never admitted to anyone was that having long hair tied up was not only easier than cutting it regularly but reminded him of the pictures of old-time musicians he saw in books). He only asked Antoinette to cut it short before they left for New York; but unfortunately, hair grows and after some time he was becoming sure God only even put hair on his disgusting head to torment him with strands in his eyes, ears, and neck. He hated it.
One Sunday, he took some scissors and sat down to either relieve himself of this itchy disaster or cut his head clean off. He took a deep breath, staring at the scissors. This had gone on too long.
„Do you need some help with that?", he heard a voice behind him and nearly jumped out of his seat.
„No." Please go away.
„Do you intend to cut your hair or your ears off your head? Both are equally probable."
„Don't you have anything better to do?" Please, please go away, he rubbed the bare part of his temples with his fingers, increasingly annoyed.
„No, I can't think of anything in the world I'd rather do than watch you attempt cutting your hair without a mirror looking like you're ready for murder. Let me go get some sunflower seeds, alright?" Alina grinned at him happily.
Enough was enough. He turned around, now actually ready for murder.
„Alright, sorry", she held out her hands, no longer smiling, „But I do know how to cut hair. I've done it before. You catch yourself getting assigned odd tasks when you work in odd places."
„I don't want you near my head", he pointed his finger at her.
„As you wish", she shrugged and left the room, pausing in the doorway. „I think it looks good on you either way, so just try not to poke an eye out."
Erik was so annoyed by now that there was reasonable
doubt someone might lose an eye if he took those damned scissors in his hands again. Did she say she thinks my hair looks good? He'd never really thought about his hair that much since it was in such proximity to a much more prominent and problematic area of his head. It seemed to him like plain, straight, black hair.

He had half a mind to leave it as it was and suffer when he decided to be reasonable and go looking for her. He found her sitting on her bed, reading Pride and prejudice again.
„I meant it when I said I don't want you near my head.", he started.
„Are we still talking about this?" she looked up. „I'm not going to lay a finger on you if you don't want me to. I'm immensely fond of healthy personal boundaries."
„Can you show me how to do it myself?" he said, feeling like he was going to regret it.
To his surprise, she immediately stood up, her tone no longer mocking.
„Of course. Although we will need a mirror, or it will just be... look, just trust me with this, it'll pay off, alright?"
„I'll endure it", he shrugged.
She lead him into Yana's house because Yana had a mirror. She explained to her quickly what was going on, and the young woman lets them go into her bathroom, looking immensely amused. Erik realized for the first time that their own house didn't have any mirrors, other than the small one Alina kept in her bag for when she needed to braid her hair or fix her hat. She had been looking at windows and doors to check her appearance until now. She had never mentioned anything to him about wanting one, although she must have been used to having it. Erik realized she may have been trying to be kind in some backward sort of way and just assumed a man who wears a mask at all times doesn't want to look into mirrors.
Yana gave him a better pair of scissors and stayed to watch for a while, amused, until she realized it distracted him and left. Alina started explaining how to cut certain strands and thin them out so it wouldn't look like he just chopped them off with a blunt knife. It took a long time, but she stayed with him through it; waving her hands around she described how to angle the scissors and the hair and work around the ties of the mask until the stupid thing did start to look more presentable.
She never once touched his head.

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Yana's boy was sick. She was so worried and desperate that she wanted to simply scream all the time. To lose her son to the same illness after she did her best to secure him a better life would be far too cruel for her to handle.

It had been a cold winter and he was too small for his age – he was already three years old, but looked like he was two. It was likely to happen. He turned weak and feverish within a few days; his cough sounded very wrong. Alina sometimes watched over him when Yana was too tired, but even though she'd worked at a hospital, she'd never dealt with physical illness. She didn't know what to do. It was hard for both Erik and Alina to look at Yana; her eyes were constantly red and puffy as she was beside herself with worry. All the neighbors came to visit her and it made her feel better for a while but the boy's state wasn't improving.
Piotr, normally talkative and full of energy, was now tired and weak; he clung to his mother, and even his crying was quieter and weaker than usual. Yana kept him in his bed, giving her best to feed him, keep him warm and occupy him to get his mind off his illness. Erik came to visit with Alina several times and noticed that their house had some structural weaknesses – it would get too cold in some places, and damp, and it didn't do much to help the boy's recovery, but he didn't know how to bring it up. The damage was already done, and he had failed to prevent it in time.
„We have to do something", Alina said as they came back from Yana's house. „He needs a doctor. It's not flu anymore, it's in his lungs. Even I can hear it."
Erik knew this, he had thought about it and reached the same conclusion; he took a small purse from his bag to give it to Alina. „I know. The girl will never be able to pay for it. Give this to her for me." he lowered it on the table, slightly embarrassed.
Alina stared at him.
„Stop staring at -„
„Are you sure?" she asked softly. „Auntie gave you that money. You might need it."
„I'm sure", he nodded.
„Half of it will be enough", Alina said, digging through her possessions. „I have something of my own to add. We're in this together."
„Are you sure?"
„Yes, neither of us has to lose everything that way." She dug out the money, throwing it on the table along with his.
„He still might not make it", he said, very slowly and carefully. „Small children often don't survive these conditions."
Alina frowned with some ancient fury he hadn't seen before. „I have seen

enough children not survive these conditions to know that by now. But this one can survive, and he will survive even if I have to turn the Earth upside down to ensure it."
So it was decided.
Erik decided to go to Yana personally after all. She knew a little English by then, and he hoped she could understand him. He had talked it through with Alina and she'd managed to convince him it would be better if he delivered the message personally.
„You've been very kind to us. Let us help. I'm scared for your son."
„What can you do?" Yana didn't like owing money, but she was desperate. God, she's so sad and so young. I can't stand it. „Alina and I have some money and she will find you a good doctor. I can stay with Piotr so he's not alone. I'll watch over him until Alina returns. I can also fix your house so it's safer and warmer for him. I've built houses before, I know how."
„I have no money."
„That doesn't matter. We want to do this. I want to do this."
Yana nodded with tears in her eyes. Whatever debt she may find herself owing them could be resolved later. Erik had no intention to take anything from her ever, and would frankly prefer if she never mentioned this again after it was over. He told Alina the news, and she hurried to the nearest town to find a doctor.
She hadn't gone to that part of the island yet, her walks with Erik mostly taking them to desolate places. The town was surprisingly... nice looking, she thought. The island was, for that part, a tourist spot, with attractions, souvenirs, and beaches; normally she would be very curious about it if she wasn't in such a hurry. She was grateful she wore her good dress and hat to do this; she mustered all of her leftover noble-born hubris while she asked around for a doctor with confidence and authority.
Soon enough, she found the doctor's office. The doctor was a pleasant man, with a thick mustache and very well-pressed suit; he looked to her like he genuinely liked people – but he liked himself more, she thought. Gathering herself, she demanded to be taken right away with all the entitlement she saw in her father when her sister was sick as a child. The doctor begrudgingly accepted her, lighting up a little when she waved the money in his face.
„My nephew is sick, and I think it might be pneumonia. It hasn't been long, but he's really small, and it's urgent."

The doctor nodded seriously, asking if she knew that small children sometimes don't survive pneumonia and that he will go with her but there might be nothing he can do once he gets there.
„Yes, I'm aware. I'm also aware that you're the doctor everyone pointed me to when I asked for the best one on this island, and I'm quite sure you want to keep up that reputation", she lied without missing a beat. Nobody said this doctor was the best one, she just asked for any doctor people could think of that wasn't a complete fraud. But that seemed to work on the man, as his eyes widened and his face lit up with interest.
„I will pay you all of this upfront", she took out most of the money in her bag, „and a bonus if all goes well, of course. You can count on me to come back whenever I need something if you make me believe you tried."
It was bold of her to say this as a poor immigrant who had just given away half her savings, but her bluff worked, surprisingly. The doctor nodded once more and followed her to the village.
To his credit, even though he was surprised when she took him to a Russian immigrant village, he stayed with her and followed through. Maybe he constructed some sort of romantic story in his head about an illegitimate child of some nobleman, but Alina never found out about it. He nodded politely at Yana, examined Piotr, and explained to them, with Alina translating for her. Piotr would probably be fine; they came on time. He would need medicine and constant care, but he had good chances. He gave them very detailed instructions and told them to come again if needed, moved by the obvious desperation on the tiny pale girl's face.
As the good doctor left the house, he pretended not to notice the strange masked man observing him from the roof.
Erik was busy at work all that time. He showed Yana spots around the house he intended to fix and explained what kind of materials he needed; Yana went door to door through the village to ask for them. None of her neighbors had the heart to deny her anything; she came back half a day later with about twice as much as he needed.
They spent a few more days in horror and anticipation. Piotr had a few more bad hours, but overall it was obvious he was getting better. His fever started going down a few days later. As Erik worked on one of the walls on their bedroom door, he noticed the boy sitting up in his bed, smiling at him with interest.
Over the next week, Erik fixed their tiny makeshift house so it wouldn't

leak and the wind wouldn't blow straight through it anymore. Piotr watched him while he worked, with more color in his cheeks and more energy with every passing day. Erik would sometimes find himself smiling at the boy and whistling nursery rhymes for him. He made him more toys, and would sometimes tell him stories. He doubted the boy could understand him, but he seemed to simply enjoy the attention and the sound of Erik's voice. Yana looked better, too. She would sometimes listen to them talk.
One day, she called him to her telling him she had something for him. After some thought, she called Alina as well.
„You saved my son."
They were both extremely uncomfortable.
„I want to give you something."
They both refused, deeply offended.
„No, you have to take it. It belonged to my husband, but now he's dead, and if you two weren't here my boy would be dead also. Take it."
She reached under her bed and took out a small rectangular box.
„You can sell it if you don't want it, but I think you'll want it." She looked at Erik.
„What is it?" he asked her with interest, against his will.
„Look."
Erik opened the box carefully to reveal a violin, and laid gently on a soft pillow, and a fiddle next to it.
„I can't take this."
„You have to."
„I can't."
„You can."
I can. But I don't deserve it. It's a beautiful old instrument. I can't have it. No one has ever given me something this beautiful. He stared at the violin, almost hungry to take it.
„Try and play it", Yana offered, smiling.
He carefully took it out of the box; Yana tiptoed up to Alina to whisper something in her ear.
„She wants me to tell you that we both think you should play it", she laughed. „She says I have to pick a song, and then you have to play it for me."
„Really?" They were both grinning.
„Yes! Please play something. I've never heard you play, and auntie Giry told

me you were an amazing musician."
As Erik took the violin into his hands, he felt like he found some part of himself that he forgot about long ago. Lifetimes ago. Something terrible, insane, and miserable. But something extraordinary, as well. Something that once kept him alive, but he'd decided to set aside since.
I've buried my wretched heart and now these oblivious, well-meaning people want so badly to dig it out.
He had managed to avoid even thinking about music since he came here. He didn't want to touch this lovely instrument because he was scared of what would come out. I want to forget.
Yana would be upset if he refused to play after she'd given him something so precious, but that wasn't the only thing that bothered him. What bothered him was that Alina would know much more about him than he wanted her to as soon as he let out even a single note. He didn't know what he was afraid she would find out, but he was certain some part of him would escape him and he wouldn't like the outcome. They'd reached an equilibrium and were getting along well. It was a shallow, unstable equilibrium, but he liked it. Why upset it?
But they gave me a violin. It's irresistible. And I'm not known for my restraint.
Alina was still grinning. She wished to be entertained. Well, that he could do.
„What would you like me to play? Something cheerful for you?" he asked, taking the violin and tuning it. It was in surprisingly good shape.
„No, no. You're about to play it for the first time. Do it for yourself."
Witch.
He started with a simple improvisation to warm up but ended up enthralled within mere seconds. I have missed this so badly. I feel like I'm reunited with an old friend like I'm home again. How could I have forgotten this? Was it worth losing half of myself only to forget –
Christine.
The music started pouring out as he forgot about the world around him. Christine, Christine, Christine. Love. Madness. Hope. More madness. Sorrow. Despair. Regret. I once thought I could trap a small piece of happiness for myself, in my little bubble, and keep it there forever. Just a small piece, just for me. Everything good in the world is embodied in one person.

I'm sorry, Christine. I truly did love you.
He wanted to stop, but couldn't. He had to let it all pour through him now or he would explode; there was no going back now. The floodgates had opened and everything was coming out, the passion, the rejection, the rage. But as it came out through this remarkable, wonderful instrument that was given to him so lovingly it shredded the spikes and shards and thorns until it was the same thing but suddenly smaller, small enough to look at and safe enough not to kill him.
Bearable.
Insanity poured out and only sadness remained. And then it was over.
Erik put down the violin, suddenly very tired.
He looked up to see Alina crying. Does she even know why she's crying? Was it that upsetting? Why am I so good at making women cry? Especially when I try to show them something about myself.
„I'm afraid that wasn't for everybody", he offered, embarrassed.
She was still crying, wiping her cheeks with her hands.
„But you asked me to play for myself, so I did. I just improvised and this is what first came to my mind. I didn't mean to upset you." This was exactly what he was trying to avoid.
She got up from her seat slowly and walked towards him, still goddamn crying please stop, and then got much too close to him, and he stood stiff as a board because what is she doing –
She started to put her arms around him and he nearly jumped out of his skin, but she did it so slowly that he managed to contain himself. The only thing missing is that you hit her now, fool. She rested her chin on his shoulder; she was fully embracing him now.
„That was beautiful."
He wanted to either scream or wrap himself around her, and he narrowly decided to try the latter. He tried to return her embrace as best as he could with the violin and fiddle still both in his hands.
It was only the sound of Yana's soft footsteps as she left that reminded him she was there.

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The island, Alina later explained, was divided into two parts: settlements of poor unwanted immigrants and the other, „good" half, the one filled with tourist attractions and pastimes. Every weekend, the tourists flocked to the „good" part and spent time and money on attractions, souvenirs, food, and other things that were offered. Erik had noticed that the others made small things to be sold to tourists on the other side of the island – it was one of the only legitimate ways the villagers could make money in their current situation, aside from construction work and factories, given that they still barely spoke English. Erik made several of those toys himself out of boredom, each new one more elaborate and carefully made, until he started adding moving parts, singing parts, and mechanisms to them. The village children were enthralled by them. The man Yana spoke to on their first night – Sergei – once came to thank Alina for teaching his son English and commented that they were good, and could probably be sold very well.
„Do you want to sell them?" Alina asked him when the man left. „Or maybe you can patent them, or sell blueprints to people who make them. They're very good."
„I was thinking about it. The problem is I am lacking as a successful salesman."
She bit her lip, trying to decide if this was a good idea. „I'll do it."
„You would?"
„Absolutely. They're much better than the other trinkets I've seen the guests buy. Shouldn't be a problem to sell them I'm quite sure we'd get good money over some time if you ask them for part of the profit."
„We?" he turned to her.
She raised an eyebrow. „Sorry, did you intend for me to be your slave?"
„Are you trying to turn your profit on the toys I'm making myself?"
„Just for the part where I go around pulling people's sleeves and advertising and negotiating profit shares, yes. Do you think you'd be better off if someone else did it?"
Truth be told, so far she'd been quite successful at persuading people around her, so it was not hard to imagine her being good at it.
Besides, the remark about being a slave stung him more than he let on. He had to admit to himself he didn't think of her perspective like that. The genuinely friendly behavior she was starting to display towards him lately, instead of the controlled professional disguise, was entirely new to him and he didn't fully know what to think about it. He hadn't even considered that

she'd offer this until now. They had both started doing separate things since they got here. Erik knew what he was good at, and he knew how to make use of it and she was good at taking care of children and talking to people, judging from what he'd seen her do so far. It didn't overlap much, and it was likely they would go their separate ways over time.
A very small voice, very deep inside him offered, so, if I do this, she's less likely to leave.
Where did that come from? She seems resourceful enough to survive on her own, and so am I, and I am no longer in immediate danger. Erik had a roof over his head and could get by with his skills now. Why would he give a damn if she decided to stay and work here or on any other side of the world?
I don't know why, but I do.
That was ridiculous. He hadn't yet decided if she was even trustworthy or if this was all still part of some elaborate debt she owed to Antoinette. Maybe she was just looking for a chance to further her standing in this place.
That's entirely unfair. She's been nothing but kind to me since I met her.
Isn't it unfair to also try to coax her into staying?
How is it unfair? I'd be doing exactly as she asked.
Isn't it unfair to pretend you're worth staying for-
„You're right", he admitted. „It wouldn't be fair. We'll share the money."
She nodded. „We'll make a good team. Let's show these bourgeoisie dimwits some real fun."
Erik bit his tongue to stop himself from telling her she's the very embodiment of the bourgeoisie.

Chapter 4: Friends

Alina,

I hope you know that, if mama gets gray hair and stomach ulcers, I'm holding you and your antics responsible. I must admit this one surprised even me, and I'm also holding you responsible for the chaos that ensued the week after your letter arrived.

That aside, I hope you're doing well in New York. I'm dying to know who this "trusted friend" is because I can smell your lies across the Atlantic. Just so you know, if you get married in America and don't invite me, I will tell mama it was you who broke her window in 1881. And then you won't be allowed to come home even if you want to.

I hope you will find happiness and whatever else it is you're looking for in America. Remember to write often - I want to hear about what's happening!

Love,

Amelija.

P. S. I know about the hairpins. Don't play dumb.

"Well, at least someone is still talking to me", she said. "Amelija has always been more reasonable than the rest of us combined."

"What is it with those hairpins?" Erik, I asked.

"They're hers," Alina said, shrugging as if it was self-explanatory.

"I gathered that much. They're just hairpins, though."

"You don't have any siblings."

ooo

Erik quickly realized that if he wanted to sell the toys to other people to manufacture them, he would need to make proper plans and documents to explain how they were made. To make those, he would need to buy paper, ink, paraphernalia, and some authoritative-looking clothing for Alina so that she could go and have them look at it and be taken seriously, and even then they may not take her seriously.

If they wanted to sell the toys themselves they would need to find a place to make a proper store so she wouldn't sell them on the street, he'd need better materials to make them with and he'd need to pay all sorts of things to all sorts of people and they'd need to make a profit fast enough not to bankrupt and lose what little they had.

It's frustrating how you need money to make money, Erik sighed. I sometimes miss living in a basement.

He could, of course, steal enough materials to not have to risk them. It's not something that would bother him very much; but he had a faint idea it would bother Alina very much, and since she already promised to do her part in all of it he found himself unable to do something that might jeopardize their integrity, and by proximity, her future.

They decided to sell the toys themselves at first, so they put the last of their savings into getting proper materials and tools. Alina had a small sum saved for "even greater emergencies"; she gave it away with the rest, but it was still barely enough.

"If anything happens to us in the next month or two," she said, adding it to the pile, "We are doomed."

"Do you want your money back? You don't have to do this, you know. You could maybe become a governess with your recommendations."

"No, that's not how we're going about this. If we're partners, we're partners at risk as well as profit. Even if it means I won't sleep soundly for a month or two." She frowned, "If we have to bankrupt, we'll bankrupt together, damn it. It's only fair."

"As you wish." That is actually, strangely comforting.

"But we won't die, I think. We've been feeding and clothing ourselves with you doing odd jobs and my babysitting so far, so I'd say we can keep doing it, in case we fail at first."

"You can always sell your sister's hairpins." This whole running gag was becoming entertaining, even to him.

"And has her cursed all my descendants for centuries to come? You sell Amelija's hairpins if you dare."

In the end, they built a small stand (to be fair, Erik was the one that built it; Alina tried very hard to be of help, but in all honesty, she couldn't do anything right and he had to ask her very patiently to please let him work alone so he wouldn't have to bother taking her to a hospital when she hurts herself) on one of the populated streets. It surprised Erik that Coney Island, under the new mayor, was slowly becoming less, hah, crime-oriented and now tried to be more family-oriented. They can certainly make use of that. Erik asked Alina to go and check if they could be imprisoned for simply building a stand and putting it somewhere to sell things without asking for permission and it turned out that, thankfully, they wouldn't. Everyone was doing it.

They both worked weekdays; Erik would still do solitary physical tasks and people grew accustomed to his presence enough not to outright gawk at him, but they still kept their distance. He was thankful for it – the odd looks were putting a significant strain on his patience and nerves. Alina was still teaching children English and babysitting younger ones; all for small money or other goods if the family didn't have much to offer. Neither of them got any quiet moments for several weeks as it took all of their weekends to build enough little mechanisms for the trinkets. Alina helped Erik as much as she could, bringing him food when he forgot to eat (which,

as she kept reminding him, was all the time) and would take over when he'd lose his patience and his head started to hurt. They had less time to talk these days; and when they did, it was usually about work. Once they made enough little mechanisms, she started selling them over the weekends. It made a profit surprisingly quickly; the tourists seemed to like the trinkets and Alina made a lot of effort to attract people to come and look at them. Slowly, over the next weeks and months, they pulled themselves from the brink of bankruptcy and started making enough to support themselves; they'd even put a little on the side each week. They did not intend to live as refugees any longer than they needed to.

Erik made one extra little music box and set it aside. He had no intention of actually giving it to her, but he couldn't bring himself to just let it go for now.

Yana would often come over to help or just to have some company. She found work in a small cake and ice-cream shop as a dishwasher and when she wasn't home Alina would take Pjotr outside with her and the other children. Yana told them she only started working there because she was hoping for another position – she was very good at cooking and baking and hoped to find work as a baker. The problem was that she still spoke little English, so Alina put in some extra effort to help her with it. They spent a lot of time together, and Yana's English started to get better.

"Your spoken English is improving fast," Alina told her one day as they sat down to have a chat. Erik was just leaving to take a walk, bundling up in his scarf, hat, and other necessary layers.

"Yes. People talk to me all the time, so I just listen," she shrugged. "And it stays."

"Can you read and write?" Alina, ask carefully. "Maybe, it would be useful."

"Yes. But it doesn't help me here. It's all different." She puffed in annoyance.

"Really? Erik asked through his scarf. "How did you learn? Is this something villagers in Russia normally do?"

"No. But my mother knows. She had a book with – cooking recipes, and I learned from there. Mikita also had a lot of books."

"Ah." He paused. "What do you mean it's all different? How do you write in Russia?"

"Exactly as you speak," Yana replied indifferently.

"Huh?"Hey, he blinked. "I don't understand. Can you show me?"He looked around for a piece of paper and a pencil. "I don't know how to spell your name. Can you write it for me?"

"Of course," she said, taking the pencil and paper. She scribbled on it for a few seconds before showing it to them. On paper, in simple handwriting, stood:

Яна Петровна Чаркашина

"See? Exactly as you speak," Yana said.

Erik stared at the paper in confusion.

Alina nodded. „That's about right," she looked at him and started to laugh. „I don't know what to tell you. She wrote it exactly as she said it."

ooo

For a while they all got so caught up in all the work that Alina forgot to write letters to Antoinette, and so did Erik, since he didn't write them as often and it never became a habit. It didn't even occur to him how stretched they were until it started to show in obvious ways. Erik would get increasingly tired and at the same time unable to sleep; a lot of things that he hadn't noticed before now started to irritate him. Alina had dark circles around her eyes and had trouble focusing. But she didn't complain at all until she'd had too much.

The next letter that arrived was from Antoinette, and the tone was much different than the previous ones. She wanted to know why they hadn't been writing for several weeks. It was clear from her letter that she was worried something had happened to them. Alina read it out loud and when she was finished she hid her face in her hands and stayed like that for a while.

"What is it?" Erik wasn't sure what to do about that sudden display of emotion, and it made him uncomfortable.

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter."

"You are upset."

She uncovered her face looking in front of her. Her eyes were very, very tired, and surprisingly... red.

"Whatever I do, however hard I try, I forget something important. There is no way I can do everything I need to for us to succeed. There is no way someone won't be disappointed, no matter how hard I try. It's becoming too much. I can't do anything right anymore, I'm simply too tired all the time. But I have to", Alina sighed. This was weighing down on her. She had become something of an expert for different kinds of tiredness in her life, and this was the kind of tired one she felt after walking on a very high tightrope for too long.

The rant caught him by surprise. He was also surprised by how much of that he could relate to.

"It's not really about the letter, is it?"Hey, he asked.

"Not just the letter. But I promised to write, and I forgot to write for so long that she's now half convinced that we're dead. By the time my next letter reaches her, she could lose her mind worrying about us." She sighed, sighed. "I forget a lot of things these days. Yesterday I almost forgot which child I had to take care of. I was halfway to the wrong house when I realized. And they don't like governesses being late, I can tell you that."

Huh. "I don't know what to tell you. I work just as much. I can't make it easier for you." But you can, if you leave this hellhole and find your luck. Why are you ignoring that option?

Alina felt even more miserable now. "I know, I know! I'll try to get a hold of myself."

Erik realized he was not exactly comforting her, despite his best efforts. He was not accustomed to this; he was fine with working on something until his body gave out and didn't pay any mind to anybody's expectations but his own; but as Antoinette told him long ago, most people were not the same. What glorious life you have to offer. Are you going to press this woman too until she breaks? Or until she starts to resent you? It's inevitable, you -

"I agree. We can't do this for long," he said. "When we have enough money, we'll look for better prospects. I'll make more of these," he gestured at the toys, "and we'll just sell the plans and patents as soon as we can to other establishments and ask for a share in profits. You won't have to do anything once the deal is made. It'll be better."

She nodded. "I know. It'll be alright. Thank you." She didn't look better.

"Besides," he tried again, really frustrated by the success of his attempts at consolation, "we have enough money that we won't be ruined if you miss one day. I'll send word to your people that you're sick today. The children will survive. Stay home and sleep, I'll take over with this," he waved his hand at his papers.

That certainly surprised her, Erik thought. Is it so uncharacteristic for me to show some understanding? Yes, it probably is.

"That's... very kind of you," she replied. "But what about you? You look just as tired as I am."

"I'm fine. I don't ever look very healthy in general, as you may have noticed," he shrugged.

She stared at him guilty for a second before starting to laugh. "I'm sorry, it's just... I never expect these, you're so serious one moment and then just... it's a complete turn, and your voice doesn't even change, it's so deadpan, I'm sorry..." she kept laughing, and Erik felt himself relaxing. He realized he hadn't heard that sound in a while.

"Actually," she said once she'd calmed down, "do me a favor, let's just both rest today. The world will hang on until tomorrow. Let's drink a gallon of tea, take a walk on that strangely deserted beach and then fall asleep for fourteen hours."

"I don't-"

"Oh, please! It'll be fun with you." She smiled,"

"As you wish." That is probably untrue, but very hard to resist. She nodded and went to get her coat.

Alina waited for Erik to put on his various layers – unfortunately, it's soon going to be too hot for them. I'm not looking forward to it – and they strolled out Erik leading through the less-populated streets until they got to the shore, and the rocky deserted beaches. He felt more comfortable walking around there; people rarely had any business there as they preferred the more welcoming, sandy ones.

There was something he needed to ask her; he had been waiting for the right moment for a while now and the moment might be this one. Alina and Erik had been cohabiting relatively peacefully for several months, and he'd gotten used to it. It seemed to him she was used to it as well. He'd say they were friends by now, but seeing as he had no experience with this sort of thing he could hardly tell if there was some other reason for her to act like this. He had been preparing the conversation in his head for several days and now he had a chance to finally ask her.

"Why did Antoinette send you with me?"

"I was half-decided to move on my own, by then. She came with the right idea at the right time, I suppose."

Fair enough. But it was not actually what he wanted to know.

"What I meant was that debt, she mentioned. I've known her for close to twelve years. She doesn't keep tabs on debts to use against people. What is it?"

"Against me? She didn't use it against me. That was not the nature of what I promised in the first place." She looked to the side, thoughtfully. "Alright, it's not a secret. It's pretty boring. Here's what happened.

As I said, when I was a child my parents argued a lot with everybody because they're difficult people – less so now than they were then. We used to travel a lot, and sometimes I'd get sick of them, so I'd wander off. It was a stupid thing to do, but I was sometimes insufferably willful when I was a kid.

Once I wandered off in the middle of Paris when I was eight years old. I couldn't speak French at all, only a little bit of German and a tiny bit of English and I got lost. Auntie Giry found me crying in the street and tracked down my parents even though she didn't speak that much English at the time either. I got scared and didn't want to go back, because I knew they'd be extremely angry and I'd be in very deep trouble, and the punishment would be severe. She understood me, so she lied to them saying – I don't even remember, she made up some brilliantly believable story about how it wasn't my fault because someone wanted to kidnap me and something – and they believed her, it was amazing, and I got away with it. I told her – in horrible German – that I owe her forever for getting me out of it. It started like that as some silly oath kids make."

"You're not the first person I heard such a story from," Does Antoinette routinely pick up lost children and casually raise them as her own on the side?"

"Please", she smirked. "I'd be surprised if there weren't at least fifty of us all across the world. But there's more. So, I gave her my address and she gave me hers and I started writing to her. I learned enough English to at least have some way to talk to her and we sent each other letters for years. She encouraged me to pursue my wishes and go to London, find a job, and so

on, but whenever I wanted to do something rash and impulsive she'd forbid me, saying that I owe her and now I can't throw everything away doing stupid things when I could be patient and in time get my way. She also told me that I have to pass good deeds on to other people, that I can't repay her but to remember it so I can get others out of trouble one day as she got me. That was one of the reasons I started working with orphans."

"And I am one of those orphans?" He asked, amused. That sounded like Antoinette.

"No, I think the point of this was to protect both of us. Traveling alone is not very safe for a young woman with limited options to defend herself. You would get accepted more easily because you're with me, but I would be safer with you in case somebody threatens me. So we'd balance each other out. That was her idea."

"Someone being safer with me is a very stupid notion."

"It works, though, doesn't it?" She looked at him with an expression, he couldn't figure out. What is going on? "I mean, we're as safe as we can be in this situation, and we're going to work together on getting a decent living here. It's not so bad." She made another long pause, and when she spoke again it was suddenly very quiet."

"Besides, I'm glad this happened, because you're my friend now."

I am? It was stupid to pretend this was not exactly what he was hoping for, but hearing it out loud still filled him with surprise and excitement. Erik suddenly realized he was smiling to himself like a fool and turned toward her.

She was looking at him still somewhat unsure as if expecting something. Oh. He cleared his throat realizing she was expecting him to say something in return. The sudden realization that she was bothered by whether or not he thought they were friends made him smile even wider as he replied,

"Huh? Oh. Yes, of course, we're friends. I think so, too."

ooo

Yana came one day while Alina was working to inform Erik that Easter, by the Orthodox calendar, was in a week. He was sketching out something new, so he absentmindedly offered her tea while she sat down at the table, then returned to his work. She kept looking at him in silence. Am I supposed to do something in particular now?

"Uh... alright. That probably means more tourists." "I am not ready."

"No, that means you come over for dinner."

"I'll tell her."

"I mean, you two come over for dinner." I could see in his peripheral vision, that she was eyeing him with annoyance now. He wasn't even aware her face could do that.

"No, but thank you." One of the reasons Erik had gotten along so well with Yana thus far, was that she understood his need to not socialize any more than necessary. He had a blast spending time with her not talking much and usually leaving after a short while.

This time, though, she had other plans.

"I mean it. You have to come. There will be cake."

"Why do people feel the need to feed me all the time? Does it look like I'm dying?"

"Yes."

He finally looked up from his blueprints, too shocked by the matter-of-fact certainty and lack of shame in her voice to respond right away.

"You need to eat more. Too thin," she concluded with authority.

"How does that concern you? I haven't died yet, and I've been alive much longer than you."

"You're my friend. Alina is my friend. You spend holidays with family and friends."

"I spend holidays playing disgustingly melancholic music and drinking until I lose consciousness, and that's how I prefer it. I don't care how skeletal you find me. You can celebrate whatever religious nonsense amongst yourselves."

She was looking at him in a way Antoinette would sometimes look at him, and he could already tell the next thing she said was going to be so motherly he might need to punch away-

"God was cruel to you, but he didn't forget you."

Ah, yes, there it is. He sighed very, very deeply and brought his fingers up to rub his temples, already feeling the birth of a headache.

"And you're here to grant me his forgiveness? I assure you, I don't need it. I'm doing rather well on my own. Or I was before we started this discussion."

"Listen", she started, suddenly straightening up in her seat, with a glint in her eyes he hadn't seen before. "I know well what you do, and I do it too. You say: I don't need anybody. I can do everything alone. I'll stay here where it's safe. And you won't go and be happy, because if it's gone, you'd be too sad. So you do nothing. And you think I did this well. Nothing can hurt me. But I did that too, and it still hurt me, and I had to come to this insane land to forget. Just like you. So don't do the same again. Do better this time. Understand?"

"Celebrating Easter is going to save me?" We were getting along so well before you became so annoyingly... like this, you traitor.

"God has nothing to do with it if you want. You come to see us, and be happy with us." She nodded at him, thoughtfully. "Alina wants you to come too, but she doesn't want to say."

"Why? She sees me every day."

"Afraid, you'll say no. If you tell her I said this, I'll have your head. Trust me."

Erik had half a mind to tell Alina just to see what this tiny quiet woman planned to do in that case. Something told him it would be worth seeing.

"I might come by. I like cake."

She gave him a very sharp smile. "I know you can be smart when you need to."

ooo

Unsurprising to people around her, Alina had always been very invested in holidays and celebrations. It could've been the fact that, when one works with children, such occasions were interesting excuses to break from everyday routine and teach them something new, try out different activities, and change the dynamic from time to time. However, it was more likely that she simply liked cakes and decorations, and was one of those children herself.

So it followed that she was delighted to accept Yana's offer to spend Easter Sunday with her and her son; while they didn't go to the same churches and shared very few Easter traditions (starting with the date of Easter) – well, Alina didn't care. The sentiment was the same. And she would enjoy spending a Sunday with her friend. Not to mention she blatantly missed properly celebrating real – uh, Catholic – Easter for the first time this year due to the overwhelming amount of work and the absence of her mother who took holidays with many more Christian feelings of duty and dedication than Alina could personally muster.

But that was beside the point. The point was, it was Easter, they'd be together, there would be cake and Alina would get to dress nicely for a change. If there is a God, I'd like to think he'll approve of that.

"I'm going to Yana's this afternoon," she informed Erik that morning. He gave her something resembling a frown beneath the mask.

"Yes, I know. I was under the impression we were both going."

Oh. "Oh. You're coming too? That's great!"

"She came to invite me. She said you-" He cut off mid-sentence, coughed, and started again. "She said you already agreed. I'm surprised she didn't tell you. But then again, neither did I. It wasn't my intention to hide it", he finished, shrugging. It had honestly not occurred to him until now.

But you did hide it, for some reason. And so did she. Wait, do I care? I do care. Alina realized she felt, in fact, jealous. They were both her friends, and she had met them both first, and she was the one who introduced them to each other, and now they were conspiring behind her-

-Slow down there, ten-year-old Alina. Let other people be friends, too. Life does not revolve around you.

No, and that's its biggest mistake. I'd be perfect as the center of the universe.

"Alright. Great. It'll be fun." She smiled at Erik, but he still looked suspicious. "Let me get dressed and everything, and we can go."

Finally, as Alina closed the door to her sort of room, she let out a breath and tried to think properly. Erik had the annoying habit of being perceptive and insightful in moments when she'd rather he didn't notice anything, and now she needed to think by herself without his prying eyes.

Alina knew exactly which dress she was going to wear as she dug through her tiny improvised closet because it was her only lightly-colored dress and she usually wore it to occasions like this one when she was not around kids who might mess up her clothes with their adorable little destructive hands. It was beige with frilly sleeves and tiny embroidered poppies on the hem of the skirt; it had an all-around innocent, airy feel to it. It made her feel so fairy-like that she considered actually putting flowers in her hair and frolicking around through forests.

She realized, nothing was stopping me from putting flowers in my hair. Why not? It's not as if she had to be poised and sophisticated right now, and she just happened to have some flowers on her desk.

How did this get here? They were not even arranged in a bouquet, just daisies and violets and other tiny field flowers scattered around everywhere. Maybe she'd brought them in by accident, or the wind blew them in. Strange. Maybe those pesky kids did it; sometimes they fill my pockets with weird things that fall out once I take off my coat at home. But they were here and they were in good shape – not too wilted or squished – so she decided to braid them in her hair while she took time to think.

Why did she get – uh, slightly upset – at this? Erik and Yana had been friends since they came here, and she had always been glad. She was still glad. Erik looked like he could use every friend he gets, and frankly so could Alina, so she had been subtly nudging the two of them towards being more open and meeting people. Alina didn't wish to shut herself in and build a fence around her; her neuroses aside, she did like company and wanted to build a rich and colorful life now that she was here and free of her past limitations.

The self-assuring tirade did nothing for the fact she still felt strange.

It had to be something else, then. Would she be upset if Yana invited someone else, another friend or relative, or even a suitor she hadn't met before, to introduce them to today? No, of course not, she'd be happy for her. Would she be upset if Erik came with another friend or a –

Oh no.

She definitely would. But why? Because I like being around him, and I want him to pay attention to me. But he already did.

Yes, but I want him to enjoy spending time with me more than other people.

That was a horrifying prospect, so naturally, she decided to ignore it completely. Her hair was braided and the flowers were woven through it in

a sickeningly adorable fashion. She was probably done. Let's do this, you crazy woman, she tried to assure herself as she stepped out of the room.

"I'm ready. And looking like a meadow, might I add. Don't say anything. I like it."

For a moment he looked like he wanted to say something as his eyes widened slightly and he stumbled a little bit as he got up from his chair. Thankfully, Alina hoped, I have prevented it in time.

"You put those flowers in your hair."

He doesn't understand the concept of not saying anything. "Yes. I found them in my room. I think those bloody kids must have filled my pockets with them. Doesn't matter, I like it."

For a moment he looked like he once again wanted to say something but completely different because his look changed from surprise to annoyance. This time, though, he seemed to have learned the concept because he just shrugged and took his coat.

"We can go, then."

And so they did. Erik was extremely nervous. This is the first time he's going to visit someone like this since we came here, Alina realized. Even Yana mostly came to them, and mostly when Alina was home. Alina wondered if Erik had even seen the inside of her house since Pjotr was sick.

Yana greeted them at the door cheerfully, dressed in her best dress, with Pjotr playing happily behind her. The table behind her was full of colorful eggs with a small, elegant olive branch in the middle.

"Alina! Erik! You both came! You look great! Alina, you put flowers in your hair!" "Well, she laughed. "And a new dress!"

"Uh, thank you."

"Come in, everything is ready."

Erik was still so tense one could shoot an arrow off of him, but Pjotr saw him and ran up to him, hugging his legs.

Dzyadyushka!"

"He means 'uncle'," Yana explained. "He remembers you watching him when he was sick. Asks about you all the time."

"Uh..." He was still extremely nervous, but Alina could see the comment got to him. He kneeled to look at the kid, amused. His eyes are much less unsettling when he's happy. They might even be charming. "So, I'd say it's time I told you how that story ended, now that you're better."

"YES!"

Yana smiled at them. "Let's go sit while the men settle important things," she told Alina.

The meal itself was a little awkward, although thankfully short; the situation was unfamiliar and Erik would still much rather starve than eat with other people, but Piotr pestering him with questions and rants constantly gave him something to do, so he mostly had an excuse not to sit by the table. Afterward, Yana took out various cakes and pastries, and a small bottle of colorless liquid.

"I think you will like this." She took three tiny glasses and poured some into each, winking at Alina.

"Home, sweet home?" Alina grinned.

"Exactly."

She gave them the glasses and the two women drank it all immediately, Erik watching them and following slowly and carefully. Big mistake. The burn that Alina only felt for a split second, he felt for much longer, and the poor man started coughing violently.

"WHAT in the world did you give me?"

"Rakija. It cures everything, from a skinned knee to sorrow."

"I feel like it added to my list of problems, instead."

Yana laughed. "Yes, but the other problems look smaller now, no? Didn't you say you spend the holidays drinking and playing sad music?"

"I didn't mean drinking poison. Is this why your countries are constantly in wars?"

"No, the poison is often what keeps us from killing each other," Alina offered.

They spent the rest of the afternoon playing checkers and entertaining Pjotr. It was such a peaceful scene; Alina realized then that she couldn't have imagined it a few months ago, back when she knew nobody and felt scared and alone, and back when Erik looked like he would like to disappear into the nearest shadow whenever someone looked at him. For a moment they all looked like family.

ooo

"So, I've known you for a while now, but I still don't know much about you", Alina stated as they left Yana's house. They could both still feel the slight tingling of the strong drink Yana gave them; it was probably wise to take a walk and clear their heads. It was an unusually warm spring evening and Erik proposed they take a walk through a secluded part of the beach. It was unappealing and full of sharp rocks; no one wanted to come there. But Erik liked it. He enjoyed the wind howling around him and the eerie calls of the seagulls above him. Alina didn't mind climbing the rocks, and she enjoyed the strange atmosphere too. Erik noticed she would go for long walks whenever she had to think, which was why he had decided to show her this place.

"Yes."

"Well..." She looked at him, expectantly.

"That's intentional." He continued walking with indifference, hoping she'd let it go.

"It's also unfair! I told you so much about me!"

"I listened." He even cared," Mostly. She did talk all the time.

"That's not the point!" Alina wasn't sure if she was amused, or frustrated.

"What do you even want to know?" You don't want to know anything, trust me.

"I don't know. Just tell me something!"

"My name is Erik."

"That doesn't co-" she was frustrated.

"I was joking. Let me think."

Erik searched his memories for something he could offer her. Sadly, most of his memories were something he didn't wish for her to know and didn't even wish to think about, to be honest. He could tell her something insignificant. Or he could make up a story. But some part of him wanted to give her a taste of what it was like to be him, just to see how she would react. So he tried to recall something he thought might interest her.

"Alright. I'll answer one question."

"Can I pick one?" Hey, she lit up.

"No, I'll pick it. But you've asked me this before, so I'll answer now.

The strangest feeling I've ever felt was when I was much younger. I lived completely alone and talked to almost no one. It would sometimes get so dark and quiet that I would, well... I always had these thoughts, in my head, that wasn't very pleasant; they were downright horrifying. But there were a few instances when I was younger when I'd been alone for so long, that I thought I heard them."

"You heard voices?" She didn't expect it, but she tried to handle the shock well. This is not the first time she'd heard something like this; the best thing to do when people confess something private, in her experience, was to take it calmly.

"Yes. I would withdraw into myself, and sometimes I didn't even talk to Antoinette even if she came, because I would... I can't explain it. I was afraid of what I might do. I didn't know what was real, but things that made no sense, apparitions, and voices, felt more real than the real things. It would last for several weeks at a time and then stop. I was completely trapped in my head, and I felt like I wasn't myself."

"That sounds... very frightening." Alina looked afraid, but Erik couldn't tell whether of him or him.

"You're in no danger from me", he tried the most probable option, barely concealing the bitterness in his voice.

"No, I meant it sounds like it was very frightening for you. Were you scared?"

Oh. "Not all the time. Sometimes I don't feel afraid at all. But some days I'd wake up and I'd suddenly be terrified."

"Oh. I'm sorry. How did it pass?"

"On its own, I think. And when I... I got away from some things. Over time it got very rare, and then it stopped. It's been years since it happened."

"When was the last time?" Alina asked because she didn't want to offend him by asking a thousand other things even as she was, by her nature, insufferably curious.

"That would be enough questions," he said slowly.

"Oh. Alright. That's fair. Thank you for telling me this."

They walked in silence for a while. Alina was deep in thought after what was said, and Erik had no way of knowing how she was taking it. This was

a horrible idea. I'm starting to regret ever telling her this.

"Do you think I'm a madman, now?" He asked, doing his best to sound nonchalant.

She frowned at him. "Huh? No."

"Even though I heard voices?"

"Listen, over the years I have met many people, mad and sane, and the more I meet the less certain I am in the distinction between the two," she skipped around the cliffs carefully. The wind was salty, she noticed. Salty wind back home usually brought the smell of rosemary, but not here.

"Do madmen normally have these kinds of stories?"

"Some of them do", she shrugged.

"Oh."

"The difference is those poor people can't function to this day, and you can. That's rare, and I'm glad for you. If it happens again, will you tell me?"

Unlikely. "So you can put me in a hospital?"

"Have you met me?" She was downright offended, now. "Do you think I'd just have you locked up? Against your will? Don't ever say that again."

"What would be the point then?"

"I don't know, maybe I could help you handle it. Or at least you can point your finger at something and ask me if it's real."

"You might get outnumbered in opinions, in that case." But, it's not such a terrible idea.

She laughed. "Ha! Good point. In any case, thank you for telling me. That does sound like a very strange feeling. If this was a competition, you'd win."

Erik shrugged. "Or I could just be possessed by the devil."

"Hardly. At least the devil would have given you something in return. Have you recently had, what, seven wishes fulfilled?" Alina stopped to pick up a small shell from the ground, inspecting it. Hello, friend. I didn't know you also lived here.

"Just one."

Oooooh!" Her face suddenly lit up. "What was it?"

"I think we agreed this was enough questions," Erik said. "What is that?"

"Oh, I don't know what they're called here. Back home we called them priljepci. They live their lives stuck to cliffs unless some adventurous kid decides to eat them," she said, showing it to him. She put the shell in her pocket, for good luck.

They'd reached the end of the road. Alina stopped to look into the distance, at the roaring sea around them. The sea reminded her of her mother's hometown. It was a different color there; a brilliant blue. This sea was a gray mess, the way the Adriatic sea would get before a storm. She did like the gloomy atmosphere – it made her feel as if she was crossing over into some distant, long-lost realm. But she'd seen enough storms to automatically feel uneasy at the sight of the gray sea.

At least the seagulls are equally obnoxious wherever you go.

"I like eerie places like this," she said.

"So do I."

"But I think we should go back now. This feels like some ghostly deserted world, and I don't want to be in it for too long."

She turned around and walked back with Erik following behind her, toward the distant buildings and faint sounds of human beings.

Chapter 5:Monsters

June 1894, Coney Island

Erik walked towards the house quickly, speeding through shortcuts. He had an idea, and it was far-fetched and unlikely, but the possibility of it however small made him jittery and nervous. He had to go on a very long walk to calm himself down and think about it. Lost in thought, he forgot about the time and the part of the island he was in, and now he was eager to escape this neighborhood as quickly and silently as possible. It was already very late and he still had a lot of work to do before morning. With a lot on his mind, he forgot to watch his surroundings and barely noticed the man following closely behind him. By the time he became suspicious, it was already too late. He was stuck in an alley like a fool. He didn't even have his knife – he had forgotten it at home, on his working desk, because these things do happen sometimes. He tried to think of what to do. He couldn't believe this would happen to him, that he would manage to get caught by surprise like this. I let myself get lulled in this little safe bubble, I stopped looking over my shoulder and now I'm in trouble. Goddamnit.

Three of them came up ahead of him, and he realized quickly what was going on. Turning around, he noticed two more. They all had knives and brass knuckles. He saw one bat casually being carried, swinging lightly close to the ground. They were much too close for comfort now.

Trapped.

He couldn't take on five of them. He thought about the possibility of escaping. Not likely.

Who the hell needs money, anyway?

They gestured for him to take out his possessions, and he obeyed. He felt a familiar tingle of anger creeping up his spine but remained steady. He'd make up for his losses later, he'd make them pay, but first, he had to survive right now. They got closer, taunting him, amused by the freak; but he said nothing. It's not just that, he realized. They want this to escalate. They're bored, they need a fight, and the mask is making them curious. And we're all quite certain they'd win this one, so I can't give them the satisfaction. Erik bitterly thought to himself how proud Antoinette would be of his composure at that moment.

But then one of those idiots behind him smacked the back of his head, kicking the mask off, and it was all over.

Everything in his vision went black as Erik lost himself. He didn't know who hit first, he or they.

He kicked and hit and punched like a madman, everything passing by in a flurry. He felt someone's nose break under his fist and heard another one's sharp breath as he kicked him in the stomach.

But in the end, five armed people would always be stronger than one unarmed man.

It was the bat that decided. It was impossible to evade forever in such a tight space, although at least the man holding it didn't have enough space to swing it full force. Erik later considered himself lucky that the superstitious dimwits were too scared to hit his head, otherwise they would have easily split his skull and killed him.

Except for the one with the bat, who swung it half-force once at Erik's left temple and it was enough to put him on the ground like a ragdoll. Everything became a blur of boots, fists, and pain. They left him alive, but barely. It was over soon though, and they ran away, with that one brave young fellow spitting on the ground next to Erik as he left.

In case the message wasn't clear enough, he thought.

He lay on the ground unable to move and stared at the night sky until he lost consciousness.

ooo

Erik woke up to a blood-curdling scream that sounded familiar somehow. He could barely open his eyes and didn't want to know what would happen to him next, but the scream turned into even more familiar crying. Was this someone he knew? If so, he should let them know he was alive since he couldn't move, so he gave his best to open his eyes and focus-

Alina.

She went looking for me.

He had to be cursed. This was too much. A thought occurred to him that she might not even have recognized him without the mask and just started screaming at the scene she found. Now that he'd opened his eyes though, she knew who he was. He got ready for her to scream again when she'd realized just what had been her friend for the past several months. If there ever was a chance she'd... well, that chance was gone now.

She didn't scream again. Instead, she kneeled on the ground next to him, still crying with one hand over her mouth. It was a sad, sad sight. One he wouldn't easily forget.

"What happened to you?"

Erik wanted to tell her he was born like this, but breathing was hard and it would have ruined the theatrical delivery of distasteful jokes.

"Beat up", he managed.

"Is anything broken?" she asked, looking him over, doing her best to compose herself. Now was not the time to cry, and she had to react quickly. She put her feelings aside and went into crisis control.

"Everything."

"Can you move?"

I don't know."

She couldn't figure it out from just looking, seeing as he was covered in blood and bruises. She leaned over him and he twitched when she got too close, but she didn't care. She took his left arm to inspect it. She was holding it so gently he could barely feel it.

"Broken?" she looked him in the eyes. Something was very off about his eyes.

"No."

She tried to repeat that with his other arm, but as soon as she touched it a sharp jolt of pain burst through his shoulder and he screamed.

"Broken."

"Got it."

"Ribs, too," he offered helpfully, hoping she wouldn't poke at every single one to find out.

"Figured as much. Your breath is whistling. Legs?"

"No."

"Head?"

"Maybe."

She moved even closer now; her left hand reached out and she moved his chin lightly toward her with her thumb. Erik felt dizzy, her face in front of him was blurry. The whole thing was so intensely uncomfortable that he almost passed out, but he still felt a tiny wish in the back of his head that she would keep her hand there a little longer.

"Your eyes can't focus. Probably a concussion. Come, I'll help you up. We're going home."

She put his good arm over her shoulders and lifted him slowly into a sitting position. Everything hurt. She got up slowly, and Erik had to lean on her because he couldn't count on his legs, but after a while, they were both standing.

Blood welled up in his mouth and he spits it out. How graceful.

"Let's go."

They started walking slowly towards the house. It was, thankfully, very close, because Erik didn't know how long he could keep this up. He felt dizzy, the ground was spinning and his legs were made of rubber.

And my face is made of nightmares, and it's inches away from hers.

To make matters worse, the strain of moving combined with concussion and blood loss made him slightly delirious and he started rambling. The whole situation was so comically horrible, that he couldn't help but let out a few helpless, bitter, angry tears. He tried to explain it was unfair, and that she didn't have to do this, and that she should just leave him here because he felt so humiliated that he'd like to stay here on the ground, thank you very much.

"I'm sorry," she said. "This is horrible. You did nothing to deserve this. It'll get better."

He tried to tell her he was failing to see how it would get better because it never did.

"Because I'll take you home and we'll patch up those cuts, and I'll give you something that'll make you sleep while I figure out how to set your shoulder right. And I'll take care of you until you're alright." Erik registered somewhere in the back of his mind how softly she was speaking and how she was straining to hold him up even though he was twice her size.

Why does this kind of thing happen to me? he wondered, and he was still talking out loud.

"I don't know. I'm sorry. But I'm here now, and I'll help you." Alina didn't know what to say. It was taking all of her mental strength to hold him up, talk to him, and not cry at the same time.

Why would she help me? She doesn't have to do this. Deep inside him, something screamed trying to stop him, but the torrent went on.

"I want to do this," she said quietly. "You're my friend."

Does she regret it now that she's seen it?

She stopped to look at him.

"No, I don't. Nothing will make me regret it. You're still the same to me. Remember that."

He didn't fully believe her, but he had no more questions for now.

They finally reached the house and she lead him to his bed to collapse into unconsciousness.

Sliding down the wall to sit on the floor next to his bed, Alina tried to compose herself to think. This was not over – Erik was still bleeding, hurt, his arm was broken and God knows what else was wrong with him. She would have to act quickly; she remembered where she found the doctor that cured Piotr's pneumonia, but she doubted he would still be in his office at this hour. Which meant she would have to go look for his house, talk him into coming, and probably pay him an impressive amount of money to get here, and then more to keep his mouth shut.

Casting a glance over at Erik's unconscious form, she decided it was a good time for her to take a moment to cry.

Alina couldn't tell how much of his face was hurt and how much was simply... like that, having never seen it before without the mask; she couldn't tell how bad his concussion was or if he had any other hidden

wounds that would require immediate medical attention. She decided she would simply have to get a doctor immediately, through any means necessary, and hope Erik wouldn't wake up and panic while he was there. She had, luckily, remembered to pick up the mask from the ground and bring it with her; she was not eager to go back into that alley to find it, and she had a faint idea it would be quite bad if he woke up and didn't have it at all anymore.

Having taken a minute to sob to herself in silence, Alina got up, wiped her hands on her dress, and went straight for her coat. She took the money, and almost went out the door, but then changed her mind and went back to Erik's room.

"I'll be back soon," she whispered at him, reaching out to move a strand of hair from his forehead. He gave no sign that he heard her. She tiptoed out of the room and left, running through the dark streets for the second time that night.

Erik woke up with a splitting headache and a lot of other, unidentified aches. He had no idea how long he had been sleeping, but when he opened his eyes there was sunlight coming from the outside. He realized he could shift his head slightly so he attempted to look around.

Alina was sleeping on an armchair next to him, with her mouth slightly open and a book on her lap. The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. Hello again, old friend. Her hair was disheveled and the dark purple circles under her eyes were visible even as her eyes were closed.

Erik's left arm was relatively unhurt so he lifted it to pat his head. His mask was still gone, but his head was partially covered in bandages. He felt a large bump on his left temple covered with a cushion of some soft cloth folded over several times. That's what the bandages were for, then. They were keeping the makeshift pillow in place. Not necessary from a medical standpoint, but a worthy improvisation. Moving his head a bit more, Erik noticed that every pillow in the house had been moved to form a fort under and around his head. Curious, he looked at Alina again. Did she do this herself? If so, why? Maybe she just wanted an excuse to cover his face at

least partially but as he focused on the nightstand on his left, he noticed the mask on it. Nothing about this made sense.

It's a peace offering, he realized. He could choose to keep the bandages on or to switch them for the mask. Either way, he would get some dignity back. Clever. She's thought it through. But she hadn't realized he couldn't affix it anyway with this headache and only one good arm.

Right, my arm. This one was properly compressed with bandages and wooden sticks into what seemed to be an entire exoskeleton on his right shoulder. Someone else did this, someone, who knew what they were doing. The cuts and bruises on his body were also professionally stitched up but badly bandaged.

He was starting to piece it together when she woke up.

She stretched and rubbed her eyes in a very unladylike manner before looking at him. He tried smiling slightly at her and she jolted up when she saw him awake, hurrying next to him.

"Hey. I'm so glad you're awake." The relief on her face was sincere.

"How long has it been?"

"Two days." She started talking, fast and nervous. "I wrapped up your head because you were jerking around, and I was afraid the shaking might make it worse. You couldn't wake up, and I got scared, so I called a doctor here. That was a hard one, I had to tear through half the island, and it cost us a lot. Anyway, he stitched you up and set your shoulder and said I had to wake you now and then to check you didn't fall into a coma. But you'll be fine. They missed your organs, and your skull is still whole. It's a concussion, though, and your ribs are broken, so you'll have to lie still for a while. I've been changing your bandages, too, so you probably won't get an infection." She said it all in one breath and stopped abruptly. "I think. Do you have a fever? Does anything burn?"

"My pride, but nothing else."

"I'm afraid I don't have a balm for that," she smiled.

"Never mind. You've done enough. More than I'd ever expected." Erik tried to clear his head to thank her properly. "You're a wonderful friend. Thank you."

She smiled so wide that the room suddenly got much lighter. "Anytime."

"And, I'm sorry you had to see all this." He gestured at his face. She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Your priorities are backward, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"Why would you apologize for that? You didn't choose any of this. Even if I was bothered, that'd be my problem, not yours."

"You're... not?" What?

"Oh, I'm bothered alright. I'm bothered that you could've died randomly after I saw you only hours before. I'm bothered that I had no way of finding you or even knowing something was wrong but lucky guesses and instincts. I'm bothered by seeing you half-dead on the ground with a broken arm and blood in your nose and mouth and half of your body turned purple. I didn't care in the slightest about your face, Erik, because of priorities. In that scene, your face is the least likely part to haunt me in my nightmares."

"Uh-huh, huh."

"For the record, I don't care now, either. I brought you this thing- " she gestured at the mask, "And you can put it on if you like because I think it's every man's choice how covered he wants to be to feel comfortable. But I don't care, and even if I did, it would still be my problem to get over it and not yours."

He thought everything she said made perfect sense, except in another reality and not this one. She truly believed what she said, and the appeal of believing it washed over Erik like a soothing stream of warm water.

Contradictory evidence was everywhere, but he decided to allow this comfortable illusion for now. After all, she did all this for him. And he was still much too dizzy and disoriented to bother proving that it was all a lie. So it would do.

"Are you crying- " Thank God she was smart enough not to finish that sentence. "Hm. I mean, are you hungry? I'll bring you some water and something to eat."

"Please."

"And some books to pass the time. For when your head clears", she offered.

"Great idea."

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Time passes rather slowly while one is bedridden. Erik slept a lot but was insufferably bored when he was awake. He could barely move so possible activities were very limited. He was reading so many books that Alina eventually started bringing him newspapers and magazines.

"What happened? Do you remember?" she asked him after a few days, trying to appear casual.

Erik lifted his gaze from the newspaper article about some „entertainment park" to look at her.

"I was robbed. Five of them jumped me in an alley."

"And?"

"And they started toying with me because they wanted a fight. Some bored lowlifes. I didn't mean to do anything, but they went too far and I lost my patience."

"Explain." he sighed.

"Well, I was already on edge from the start. One of them came up to me from behind and hit me on the head. The mask fell off. They got angrier and I went insane." Stop frowning, wretched woman. "They looked ready to kill me when they saw me, so I thought I'd rather kill them instead. You can see how that ended."

"So you started hitting first?"

Does it matter? "Maybe. I don't remember. But I don't think it made a difference. They just wanted an excuse."

She didn't fully believe him. Well, she was free to think about what she wanted.

"Alright, I suppose," she said. "I can't blame you, even if you did. They deserved it. I'm just sad it all happened." She did blame him a little for not being careful, for almost losing him, but would never admit it to him in this beaten state. Erik refused to admit anything at all now that it was already done and he was bedridden with broken ribs that made it hard to breathe.

Fair enough. He focused on the newspaper.

As days passed Erik slowly learned to walk and breathe properly again. His ribs still hurt every time he took a breath, but it was becoming bearable. His arm was in a cast so playing his violin was out of the question, but thankfully his dominant arm was left, so he could still write and draw at least.

He decided to buy a small palm pistol to defend himself - it seemed like a wise choice if he didn't want to die next time. He didn't know what compelled him to tell Alina he intended to do it, because he had a feeling she wouldn't like it.

She didn't like it in the slightest.

"I won't have something like this happen to me again", he told her.

"And that's the way to go about it?"

"Listen, Alina, I have to admit you're very good at making safe little bubbles around yourself, and you use the advantages you have well enough to avoid trouble. But not everyone is the same, and I for one am a goddamned magnet for trouble, and in nearly thirty years I've not learned how to avoid it."

She still didn't like it.

"Weapons are not trouble pacifiers! It's like putting out the fire by pouring vodka on it!"

"Well, maybe I'd prefer to pour vodka on the fire and burn us all instead of just me!"

"It's a horrible idea! We'll have enough money soon to move somewhere safer, and you'll just bring the trouble along by doing things like that!" Alina felt herself getting upset.

"In case you haven't noticed, I bring trouble along no matter where we go! If it wasn't for me you'd already be living somewhere safer doing whatever you wanted to do!" With whomever, you wanted to be with instead. "Didn't you notice this before?"

Her expression turned from anger to alarm and, slowly, into sadness. Which, Erik thought, was much harder to deal with.

"Listen, I can understand where you're coming from. I have to admit if this happened to me I'd want to get revenge and make them pay for it."

"I have no intention of going after them. Even if I wanted to, I don't know who they were, because I forgot their faces due to my head being nearly knocked off my shoulders."

She winced at the memory.

"What bothers me", she said, "is that you're somewhat..." she trailed off, feeling suddenly anxious. This would not be an easy conversation, she realized.

"Yes?" Say it already, damn it.

"Uh..." she furrowed her brow a little, trying to think of the right words.

"Alina, get yourself together and say it already." Erik had no time for the right words; he wanted sincere ones, even if they confirmed his worst fears. Which they probably would.

She was angry again, which was more bearable to both of them than when she was anxious.

"Fine", she straightened to look him in the eyes, "You're impulsive and aggressive at times, and your decision-making skills go right out the door whenever you're afraid. You just do whatever drastic thing you think will create enough commotion that you can escape. While I can very much relate, I'm afraid of what it will be like if you have something that deadly and efficient with you."

I probably deserved that, Erik thought. Hearing her say it still made him feel like someone had knocked him in the head again.

"Are you afraid of me?" For a moment he was too shocked to be angry; his voice broke as it came out him.

"Not like that."

"Like what, then?"

"I'm not afraid you'll do something to me, I'm just not sure what to think about your reactions towards most people. And yourself, to be honest."

"My reactions?"

"Yes. I'm not talking about you getting beaten up because I think you couldn't have deserved something like that no matter what. But I've noticed you interpret situations much more threatening than they are, and you react... accordingly, I suppose, but it escalates instead of calming down."

"And what do you know about threatening?" Erik's voice was back, but it came back as poison. He felt like he was being blamed for provoking people by simply existing. Anger crept up his spine demanding a sacrifice, although with years it had started demanding less and less.

"I know some." Alina was bitter now as well.

"Some? Do you think I know 'some'? Have you any idea who I am?" Stop now, idiot, reason pleaded, but he was just getting started. He raised his voice.

"Has Antoinette ever told you how we met? Because I'll tell you now, and you can judge for yourself how unreasonable I am. She found me when I was about sixteen, and you know where?"

She shook her head.

"In a goddamned cage, that's where! I was in a circus cage, chained and set as an attraction! People threw things at me for fun! Like some monstrous beast to look at from a safe distance!" Alina stared, wide-eyed and mortified. Erik pulled up the sleeve on his healthy arm with his teeth to show her. The pale, jagged scars she noticed on his wrist long ago extended all over his forearm, continuing past the elbow and under his shirt.

"That's how I got these! They spread to my back! There are whip marks too! They had enough time to fester in the nine years I was there! Have you ever looked at a whip up close and wondered what 'threatening' means? I would have died there if she hadn't stolen me from them like she was stealing a purse in some back alley! They thought I was a thing! Most people do!"

She stared at his forearm in silent horror. I may as well ruin it completely now. "So now that you know who I am you can take your reasonable negotiations to hell and let me take care of myself!"

As anger started to leave him, he realized what he just said. I think I better leave before she can kick me out herself, he pondered, but Alina had other plans. She was suddenly eerily calm and composed. The switch in her head

was flipped – she was handling this as a professional in a crisis, not as a friend. Erik realized he probably deserved that too, but it still stung.

"Do you think that's who you are?" she asked.

Does that matter? "You can ask Antoinette if you don't believe me."

"Do you think if I ask her who Erik is she will tell me he's a freak she stole from a cage once?"

He had no answer to that.

"Because I've spoken to her about you, and she didn't tell me this story. You want to know what she told me?"

Do I? "What?"

"She said you were her boy and asked me to take care of you."

"That's kind of her", he shrugged, feeling somewhat calmer against his own will, "but it's beside the point. The point is that you think I'm a maniac, so you might as well know why that is."

"Do I? Because that's not what I said. There's a whole world between impulsive and aggressive at times and maniac. If I thought you were a maniac, I'd be smart enough not to have this conversation with you. Haven't you noticed yet that I'm extremely good at avoiding dangerous people?"

Erik suddenly realized why he wanted to tell Alina what he was going to do. He wanted her to talk him out of it. Even more, he wanted her to know the things he thought about and wanted to do so she could argue with him and he could see if she thought he was a monster. But now he had given away much more than he had intended to - she knew so much about him he felt like he was losing his ground. The more she knew, the more likely she was to see the simple truth of it.

"I'm a monster. You just haven't noticed that yet."

She took a moment to think, slowly lowering herself down in one of the chairs.

"This seems to be a recurring theme with you," she said, burying her face in her hands.

"No one knows that as well as I do."

"I have to admit, I have no idea how to solve this problem."

"I agree with that, too." He prepared himself for the blow.

"No, I mean, the problem of you having dysfunctional ingrained ideas about yourself and others which I only now found out have been beaten into you with an actual whip. I have no idea what to tell you because nothing I tell you will erase it." She sighed. "I can tell you you're not a monster, that people who put children in cages are real monsters, but it won't matter if you don't believe me, because you can always tell yourself I'm just delusional."

But I want to believe her so badly. Can't she reassure me some more?

"What would help is that you try to tell yourself the same things I told you," said Alina, the professional. I'd prefer to have Alina the friend back. I'll be lucky to see that one again.

"I know more about me than you do. It's not convincing."

"Well, the logical conclusion would be that you tell me everything that bothers you then, and I can make an informed decision about your humanity," she said. He decided to ignore the sarcasm.

"I can't do that."

"Why not?"

Because if you decide what I think you will, you'll be gone. And I couldn't stand that. I don't want to be alone again. He was still not entirely certain the blow wouldn't come right now.

"I just can't."

She shrugged. "As you wish. But I wish you would think about what I said. Maybe in time some of it could even get through your thick skull."

"Please. So far not even a wooden bat could get through my thick skull."

A sudden burst of loud laughter erupted from Alina in the middle of that cursed mess of a conversation. Erik was glad to see her back being herself, if only for this moment.

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Alina was at her wit's end for weeks. She felt as if she aged a decade.

Erik was... not himself, she thought, but at the same time he was; ever since she found him in that alley. It was all very random and confusing, and even though she could understand why he'd act like this, it still bothered her. He scared her just a little, but she knew that if she so much as thought that too loudly, he'd get even worse. So she pretended with all of her heart that it didn't bother her, and tried to reassure him that everything was fine.

He was moody and hard to talk to. He would get irritated easily when she was around, but when she was away for a while and came back he would be irrationally nervous, scared, and often angry; but the explanations for why he was like that or what was wrong sounded like nonsense to her. Alina felt as if every time she left the house he expected her not to ever come back, and then when she was back he would sometimes act like she meant to leave but changed her mind at the last moment. He found offense and accusation in the most innocent things she said, and then she could barely convince him that he misunderstood her – even though he misunderstood her all the time! It would get worse when he was alone or had nothing to do, and then better again after she was home for a while. He never voiced his thoughts openly but Alina could read between lines – not to mention she had quite a lot of experience in noticing other people's anxiety and agitation. She noticed his nightmares getting worse again as well. She could sometimes hear him waking up and pacing around his room in the middle of the night. She realized his movements had that strange, ghostly feel about

them as they did when she first met him – she hadn't even noticed when it stopped, but she noticed now that it was back.

She spent a lot of time with Yana that month. They would go out on walks, talk about life or sit at home and try to relax. They both still worked nearly all of the time; the moments of leisure they got to spend together were precious to them and so they tried to talk about happy things; they both avoided mentioning the obvious problem looming like a dark cloud over the head until several weeks later when Alina finally decided she could not handle this alone. She had no idea what to do, so she decided to ask Yana one day what she thought about the whole situation, while they were walking around with Pjotr.

"Have you noticed Erik being rather... uhh lately..."

"Possessed by a demon?" Yana raised her eyebrows at her.

"Exactly. What do you make of it?"

She thought about it silently for a while. Yana is a precious treasure in my life, Alina thought for the thousandth time that year. Beneath the shyness and timid demeanors were a sharp mind and a brave heart. Alina had no doubt she would have a clever insight into the situation.

"He looks through me when I talk. Keeps looking around the room. Whatever I say without thinking, he finds something bad in it. Thinks I'm laughing at him. Always nervous."

"Yes, I've noticed that too. Among other things." She told her about the nightmares and the bizarre ideas.

"Hmm." Yana furrowed her brows. „He thinks they're still attacking him. Who were they?"

"I don't know. Neither does he. Says he doesn't remember their faces."

"Oh." Yana looked at her friend sadly. "Then it can be everyone. In his head it is everyone."

"That sounds horrifying," Alina admitted. "I have also noticed he's not entirely – decided is not the right word – he feels like he deserved it, I think. But not because of something he did. He just thinks he deserves these things, or that they're meant to happen to him regardless. But it makes him even angrier. He doesn't even consider that what he does has any outcome in these situations. He thinks it happens because of what he is. He thinks he's a monster, or something similar."

Yana took one more moment to think while Pjotr showed her a peculiar bug he'd found. She talked to him in Russian, and Alina could understand barely so much to gather what they talked about most times.

Yana herself had noticed the same change in their friend, and she could understand it rather well. She, however, had somewhat more limited resources when it came to patience compared to Alina; she had her work and was a small child and was altogether the kind of person who avoided extreme situations and emotions, thank you very much. Her recent talks with Erik ended often with her rolling her eyes and going home, silently fuming to herself. She still came back every day, but Erik was so frustrating and Yana, having grown up with the notion that dramatics was a luxury people like her could never afford, hadn't stopped to think about what made him that way. Yana's good behavior was taught to her by her strict but loving upbringing and the expectations of people around her – it followed that this man had to live completely isolated from people and any expectations to be acting like this, and Yana realized she could not imagine someone living like that at all, let alone living happily.

She turned to Alina again.

"And you tried to help him so much. But every day he's less happy about it. Even angry. Yes?"

Alina swallowed something hard in her throat. "Yes. I thought it was just pride. But it's not that simple."

Yana shook her head. "Pride, but not just pride. If you say he thinks he deserves beating then he doesn't deserve... care? I think. But he wants it.

But thinks it's a... trick." That... that's such a simple explanation, Alina thought. But genius. She figured it out.

"That's downright tragic," she said.

"Yes. Maybe why he's so angry. Doesn't know what is true. Good or bad", Yana replied.

"What should I do? What can I even do?"

"I don't know."

Alina thought she might cry, just a little bit, after all.

"You think he's good? Not a monster?" Yana asked.

"Definitely."

"I think so, too. But you're scared. He's strange. And looks dangerous when angry."

"Yes. But he's never actually harmed me. He's just rude. Undeservedly."

Yana sighed. "I don't know. It's hard. We'll wait and be nice. We can talk to him when it's over."

Yana was right, Alina realized. Whatever they may want to discuss with him would have to wait until he stopped acting like the sky would fall on his head at any moment. Their best bet was to act normal and try to be patient. Keep being nice and reassuring. He couldn't be like this forever. I hope.

"Thank you, Yana."

"It's nothing."

Alina had to think about this, but she couldn't think about it at home. She needed to walk around and get some distance between herself and this

bizarre situation, but first, she needed to go home so she wouldn't just disappear for an entire day. She quickened her pace.

Auntie Giry, I wish you could help me now.

It didn't take her long to reach their little house, and when she opened the door she saw Erik standing by the window, looking outside in deep thought.

"Hello, Erik. I was outside with Yana. How are you?"

He gave her a small shrug with his one good shoulder, still looking at the window.

This man's penchant for drama will never cease to amaze me.

Is that so bad? she thought suddenly. There's something very honest and powerful about it. I don't go around expressing myself as he does. Most of the time I'm concerned with how people will interpret everything I do.

Maybe it would be better if I acted more spontaneously. Some folks are like that. Maybe he'd be more inclined to believe my intentions if I seemed less calculated since he can always find some fault in the words themselves.

It was counterintuitive, but certainly worth trying, even though it didn't come easy to her lately. But she would prefer to get some time alone first.

"Erik, I had a lot to do these past weeks... If you don't need anything I'd like to grab a book and read it alone on the beach for a short while. Is that alright?"

He shrugged again, still looking out the window. It bothered her; it was completely different from before, and he was now unreadable. It was incredibly unnerving.

Alina grabbed her book and got ready to go. Erik was still silent.

"Alright, then. I'll see you later, I'll come back before sundown." she turned towards the door.

"Wait." If it was any quieter, she would not have heard it at all.

Surprised, she turned around, still holding the door knob. "Yes?"

He was turned towards her now, and she realized he was not nervous, angry, or agitated. He looked sad.

"I... I don't know. Enjoy your afternoon."

Is that it? she nodded. "Thank you, too." This is very awkward. What is going on with us?

She wanted to just leave and go think to herself, but something told her that what she says at that moment before she had the time to think about every word carefully, might be very important. She felt an incredible pull to say something.

"Erik, I..."

"Alina, I..." he started at the same time, and then stopped, looking uncomfortable.

Oh. "Ahem. You first?" I'm still a coward, yes.

But so was he. He shook his head. „Not a chance. You this time."

"Alright. I just wanted to say I've noticed you're not feeling well, and I don't fully understand it, but I want to understand. And I'm here if you need me. I am. I'm not going anywhere."

"I was just going to", he stated, „I just wanted to say I know I've been... I'm sorry, that you had to put up with me. I don't know why you did. But I have something for you." He took a tiny, simple box out and handed it to her. It was the size of her finger, with a little handle on the side and etched flowers on the top. Alina took it in her hands with extreme care. It's a music box. He's made dozens of them by now, but this one looks different.

"You can play it later when you're reading," he said. He'd prefer it if she didn't play it now.

"Uh – what...? It looks so sweet! It's adorable!" Alina couldn't help but smile at the tiny thing like some impressionable little girl. It is something special. "I love it! Thank you!"

"It's nothing. I just thought you might like it. I'll see you later." He got up and left for his room. Little steps, little victories., Alina thought. He'll come back to us soon.

Alina left for the beach and sat down, not even attempting to read. The music box played a melody so sweet and romantic when wound up that she couldn't help but play it over and over again. It had to be something he composed. She'd never heard it before, but something in it rang like Erik. Not the brooding, strange Erik she'd seen lately. The other Erik played with Piotr and walked along the island looking for hidden beaches with her. Erik stole Yana's cookies one time because she told him there was no way he'd be able to find them and Erik sometimes spent hours on end playing hauntingly beautiful compositions on his violin. Erik noticed much more than he let on and came forward with surprisingly caring moments when one least expected him to.

That Erik still existed, she would just have to wait for him a little longer.

She couldn't fully imagine how he was feeling. It was probably true what Yana said; from what she know about him – what he'd told her - it seemed he'd never had any friends or family save for auntie Giry. He may have escaped France but horrible people were everywhere and this was the kind of thing that happened to him a lot. It was entirely possible, then, that he was waiting for them too to turn on him any day now. If Alina were in his place, she'd be suspicious if some people suddenly started acting completely different from what she'd known all her life. Thinking of her as their friend when all she'd been in some caged freak and whatever else he's been in his life. How does a child know what he is? His parents tell him. This is your name. This is your age. You are a boy. You are our son. What have people told this man to make him believe these insane things?

Well, even if he doesn't think himself human, I do. I'll think it so obviously and so loudly he'll have no choice but to believe me eventually. I'll be so overt in my belief in his goodness that he will feel inclined not to disappoint

me; I'll be so adamant that all of God's angels will hear me if need be and redeem this strange, deformed, wonderful man. I hope that will work. I have nothing else to try.

Alina felt ready to go back, and just in time. The sun was starting to set.

Chapter 6:Ambitions

When Alina came back home, Erik was still in his room. He didn't come out until the next day when he greeted her with a truly brave but pathetic attempt at seeming normal and carefree. From then on, he did his best to stay occupied, reading newspapers and sketching out different designs for his mechanisms.

Alina noticed him calming down over the next few weeks; becoming less suspicious and more relaxed around her, and Yana, again. He became quieter and withdrawn; as if he'd spent all of the energy he had had and now had to wait for it to refill. She waited some more, hoping his behavior would soon return to normal. It was the work that got him out of the episode in the end. Once he had drawn and described all of the designs he'd had so far, he seemed to feel better. People do generally benefit from feeling useful, I suppose, Alina commented to Yana. She was busy enough with her work, so she focused on that.

The city wanted to build several more schools for immigrant children. This, in Alina's opinion, was a terrific idea that she wanted to be a part of – so far, she had enough education and experience that she might just approach them and ask for work – but she was hesitant. She felt a slight pang of guilt at the thought. It wouldn't be fair to just abandon Erik, but she had no idea how they were going to continue what they were doing or make it a sustainable long-term option.

The stand was going along nicely. Many people had noticed her and remembered her; they waved at her as they passed her by. Other storeowners mostly didn't like her as she was in their competition, but at least they knew about her, she thought. It might be good for the future that people remember her as someone who sold the damned things successfully. She was putting a lot of effort into being cordial and charming, and it worked wonders. The problem was, that they were scraping the bottom with the toys, and Erik couldn't make them very efficient with one of his arms in a cast.
So they decided that, once they were all sold, they would sell the designs and blueprints to renowned storeowners for a part in the profit.

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Which, Alina explained, would probably include Jack Franklin.

Alina knew who he was, and she didn't particularly like him. Erik blatantly despised him because he couldn't feel anything in moderation. Jack had a small store near Alina; he sold everything and anything – candy, toys, trinkets, postcards, and so on. He was remarkably successful and seemed to be a very cunning salesman. He knew who Alina was, too, since almost everyone there knew each other – and Alina happened to appear suddenly with a lot of very particular toys and a very particular attitude, and became popular among tourists rather quickly. While most others made it clear they didn't like her and saw her as unwelcome competition, Jack was smart enough to try and be nice and welcoming. Alina had no doubt he was doing it for his benefit, but she had to admit it was still a very appealing act. Jack appeared to be in his thirties and had a sort of boyish quality on his friendly face. His messy brown waves and shiny smile made him appear very likable and charming to most people; a fact

he seemed to be well aware of and one that made Alina very suspicious of him since she first saw him.

Cunning and calculated. That was the first thing she knew about him, and the second seemed to be that he paid no regard to societal pressure, traditions, and prejudice of people around him. He seemed like a good man to approach with a business deal – he was smart enough to take Alina seriously and put profit over his pride – as long as she would be careful and not let him rob her senseless. Erik agreed, begrudgingly, although it seemed as if he wanted them both as far away from Jack as possible. Alina thought this was an overreaction – although the man seemed somewhat manipulative and focused only on his success, he seemed to have something of a moral code. While he was blatantly ripping off the richest, most snobby customers, Alina happened to notice him lowering the prices for less wealthy customers, and it seemed as though he dropped candies for poor immigrant kids to find them much too often for someone not at all forgetful. And in those short months, Alina was there, he tried very hard to find out who her secret business partner was, but even though she never told him he was either nice or smart enough not to overstep any boundaries.

And so, one day in early autumn, Alina entered Jack's store with a handful of sketches under her arm and a very well-rehearsed proposal in her head. He raised his eyebrows when he saw her, looking rather smug about something. I'm so glad Erik didn't go instead. He'd have wrung his neck.

"Good afternoon, Miss Boričević. How can I help you?" this whole formality was a joke. They'd been on a first-name basis for a while.

"Good afternoon, sir. I was hoping to discuss something with you." Alina raised her head, her spine straight like a broom. She wasn't going to let some slimy arse spin her around his finger.

"I'll discuss anything gladly with you, Miss."

"Good. I have a business proposition, actually." she sat across from him, and took a little breath. "As you may have noticed, I've been selling some very well-received toys that can't be found anywhere else."

"Everyone's noticed. It's driving them mad." He smiled at her," "Are you selling me the secret to your success?"

He's trying to get me out of balance by cutting to the point before I can try to persuade him. He wants to catch me off guard and lead this conversation. Well, I can play more than one act.

"Smart man. You guessed it." She smiled, as well. Go to hell, Jack.

"Forgive me, Alina, but a man is sometimes insufferably curious. How did you decide to do this, all of a sudden? You were doing quite alright on your own."

"Are you worried I'm scamming you, sir?"

"Not, Miss. Your face is a testament to honesty and noble intentions as well as beauty. But if I'm going to buy a secret, I'd like to know it first."

Please impale yourself on a spike, Jack. "What exactly do you wish to know?"

His eyes glinted in them, which Alina disliked. "Several things."

"Alright. I can only hope to survive your interrogation."

"Who makes the toys?" he asked sharply.

"My business partner."

"Who is he?"

"Nobody. He's a hermit with a penchant for building these... mechanisms, illusions, and magic tricks. He can build almost anything from scratch, but he can't be arsed to interact with people, so I do that part of the process. We came here together from Europe."

"Hmm." He looked at her while he thought about it, "And now he wants to sell these little blueprints so that someone else can make them, and he gets the money and moves on to other things?"

"You guessed again, you clever man, you." Please step on a nail, Jack.

"And you're here to convince me, in place of this incredibly bashful man, that I should buy these blueprints for great money because they're the best damn thing I've seen in my long career of ripping off people with more money than brains?"

"Absolutely. They are fantastic, and you know it."

"That they are. What I do not know, however, is why you would approach me, of all people, since you seem to have been waiting for me to spontaneously combust for the entirety of this conversation. Surely there's someone you dislike less, with worse negotiating skills, you could sell this to? You'd get a better deal."

Right now there's no one I dislike more. Alina did her best to show only a tiny amount of irritation she felt. Just to make it sound believable as if she had lost her composure. "I

simply don't like the way you talk. It's so obviously manipulative I want to jump out of my skin. Might work with tourists or naïve old ladies, but I can see what you do." she took another breath. "But, I have to admit you're clever enough to have taken me seriously since I first saw you, and you recognize what I'm bringing to you as something entirely different. You'll make good use of this. Long-term, it's a good option to have you as an associate."

He was openly smug now. "Ah. I see."

"Does this sate your curiosity?" Please get hit in the head with a baseball, Jack.

"On the contrary. Did you know I was once a journalist? This kind of thing just makes me more curious. But I'll stop for now."

"Nice of you."

"So, I have a proposition then", Jack waved his hand at the blueprints, "I'll buy these from you for exactly the first price you were going to offer. I don't even care what it is. I know you probably spent days deciding on it. I won't bargain with you at all. Take it as a sign of my good intentions."

"Alright...?" please swallow a fishbone, Jack. What the hell kind of game are you playing?

"But, and I'd like you to take a day to think about this – I'd like to order more of these, and I'd like you to sell them to me and only me, and I'll buy them for a fair share in profits every time. But don't sell them to anyone else. You're right, I can make good use of them. Better than those other small-minded dimwits. Let's think big. What do you say?"

"I'll... think about it."

He grinned a very snake-like grin.
"Of course. Consult your hermit friend. I'd like to meet him too if that's alright."

"Probably not a very good idea. For now." For eternity.

"Oh, the heartbreak! Alright, then.
Take these adorable sketches and come back tomorrow with your answer. While you think about it, tell me one thing: have you thought about why you dislike me so much, fair maiden?"

"No, I try to think about pleasant things mostly."

"Oh, of course", he smiled again. "But consider this fair maiden: I may not be fair, or maiden-like enough for your tastes, and I'm alright with that. But the reason you find me so unnerving might be because I'm something you recognize in your mirror, and you can't fool me the same way I can't fool you. We're both sunshine and daisies on the surface, yes?
Something entirely different underneath. Until you get to see what's underneath, it would be wise to refrain from making assumptions about my character, and I'll refrain from making assumptions about yours."

For a split second, it seemed to Alina like he was offended, deep down, that she thought he was a manipulative snake; but he resumed his air of arrogance and cheer almost immediately.

"Alright, that's fair. I'll see you tomorrow." Fine, Jack, don't swallow a fishbone. Just die painlessly.

"Farewell, fair maiden."

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Alina hurried home to tell Erik about the whole conversation, and he was displeased. To put it mildly. She wondered for a second if smoke might start coming out of his ears.

"He wants what?" he stood up, pacing around the room furiously.

"Well, he wants to work with us. Long-term. That's not a bad idea."

"Why exactly would we want to work with him?"

"Because he's clever and resourceful," Alina shrugged. "He'll be very useful to us."

"And he also seems like exactly the kind of man we should never trust with anything! Why would we do this? Don't you remember how we ended up here?"

"By trusting strangers, we couldn't figure out, to get us out of unfavorable situations." Alina offered. Check-mate. He stopped dead in his tracks and she had a few more seconds to say what she wanted.

"Listen, I don't trust him either, alright? But I think we may be wrong. He didn't ask for anything suspicious or unfair. You're just – look, we're both overreacting because we're used to either having the upper hand with people, having control over the situation, or drawing into ourselves. It might be good if we tried something different. It hurts my pride to say this, but he's right." Swallow another fishbone tonight, Jack. For having me say this.

"So you agree with him? You want us to accept this?" he asked. Alina was surprised to notice he looked a bit hurt.

"I do want us to accept this. Your arm is hurt. You're capable of building amazing, ambitious things, and you're making toys.

I don't think you'll be happy like this." This next part has to be very, very careful. "We're very overworked, and we don't have to be. You deserve to be recognized for your full potential, and so do I. I'd like to have time to work in that new school they're opening. I'll still work with you, of course", she hurried before he could interrupt her, "I would like to be able to do both, but I can't if we insist on doing absolutely everything ourselves from the very bottom. That's what I think."

He looked to the side for a moment. "Do you think so?"

"Which part, exactly?" I won't be drawn into a trap," I'm not sure if he's still in that strange phase where he takes words out of context and twists them into knots.

"You think we could make something more ambitious? Because I had an idea", he swallowed, uncertain. "I think I can make it good enough, but I don't know how to... show it to people, I suppose."

"What do you mean?"

"They're making these entertainment parks around the island. Do you know the ones? Closed, that can work all year?" Alina nodded. Of course, it was all over the newspaper.

"Well," he continued, "I've had some ideas. For those parks. Illusions, mirror rooms, and rides. I've been sketching them out, and it seems like it might work. But I'd need someone to go and sell it to them." He looked at her apologetically. "Maybe someone who's more experienced in those things. You've been very good, but... I can't imagine you in that context."

"No, you're right. I hate big business." Although I hate being obsolete, as well.

"So, unless Jack wants us to sell everything that I ever make to him... if he's reasonable, he could work with us as a representative. Unless he intends to make an entire entertainment park from scratch with those designs. Which is all the same to me, as long as he doesn't bankrupt us or take our savings. "

"Do you want me to ask him about that?" This was going, rather well. Alina was also internally dying to see those designs, to be honest; she didn't know he was even making them.

"Would you?"

"Yes, of course, I would. But you could also come with me. It might be a good idea– he said he wants to meet you already. You can tell him everything, see what you think about him, and negotiate everything personally."

He looked worried. "That's not a very good idea. What about...?"

"One of the reasons I wanted him in the first place is that he isn't... shaken easily. I've seen how he talks to people. Even if he thinks you're strange, it won't bother him." Alina could say that, at least, Jack did talk to everyone the same way. She had seen him talk to a blind old beggar and a rich young businessman's son. He didn't care. He might keep his composure even if he saw you without that mask, but you're still too stubborn to ever take it off, even in front of me.

"Very well," he sighed. "I'll try."

"Can I see your ideas, though?" Alina could barely hold her curiosity. "Everything you've made so far was amazing! I want to see them, please!"

He smiled a little. "Are you hoping for more gifts?"

"I am. Are you offering me more gifts? A whole armada of music boxes? A symphony just for me? Maybe an opera or two?" she couldn't help, but grin.

"Maybe someday." He took out a handful of paper from under the table. "Now, take a look at these and tell me what you think."

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They decided to go to Jack the next day. Alina was only slightly nervous, unlike Erik who once again looked like he'd rather die and become a ghost than interact with another person. At least this will confuse Jack if even a little. I'd love to see that smugness wiped off his face.

"Hello, Jack. I've brought my business partner with me. We can all discuss it together now."

He didn't expect a man in a mask with a broken arm, but alas, he's back on his feet instantly.

"Fair maiden is back! And with the mysterious knight from the shadows! It's an honor to meet you, sir. My name is Jack Franklin. I take it my offer piqued your interest, at least." He offered his hand he took care to offer his left hand so that Erik could shake it with his healthy one.

Erik accepted it, not noticing, pondering whether to smack him or run. Alina could tell, she knew him.

"I'm Erik. Yes, I'm interested. I wanted to discuss some of it with you."

"I'm certainly listening, sir!
Your designs are something special. I'm sure we can agree."

"I have many more," he said. "I can do enough to support us both until we die. Why should I sell them to you, specifically?"

Alina suddenly realized she might enjoy watching this.

"Didn't I tell Miss Alina already? I know a lot of people, and I know how to present things to them. I can make them feel like they need them. I can sell almost anything to anyone. And you both seem disinclined to bother with it yourselves," Jack nodded at them courteously.

Erik turned to her. "Is this true? What do you say?"

Alina shrugged, following his act. "It seems so. He's doing well, and he hasn't been here long."

He turned to Jack again. "Why are you stopping this one store, then? People have gotten rich much quicker than that. How are you so good, and yet I've only heard of you now?"

"Couldn't I ask you the same thing?"

"You could, but my qualities are not in question here. Also, I wouldn't advise asking." His eyes were flickering beneath the mask; Alina noticed, barely stopping herself from smiling smugly. Is this what men do when you leave them to their own devices? Smash their horns to death? This is insanely amusing.

"OK. I haven't been doing this for long. I spent some time being a journalist, and then before that, I spent some time being a young prodigal son; traveling around making a nuisance of myself, and getting into all sorts of trouble. It's only recently I decided to settle down and acquire some nicer material possessions."

"I have some designs for bigger things," Erik said, not paying attention to Jack's life story, "Things fit for

a whole amusement park. You're aware they've been opening up across the island?"

"Of course."

"Do you have any intention of starting something like that?"

"Not," he said, completely serious for the first time. "If there's anything I want to avoid in life, it's mafia. If you want to own one of those things on this island, it's going to come with the mafia, bribes, and politics. Big projects, attract crime as honey attracts fleas. And then some new big head comes to the big head chair, puts them all into jail, and puts his guys in their place. I have no interest in it; I value my head and my goddamn peace. I'd rather get comfortably wealthy and have them leave me alone. I've seen enough mafia in my life and I'm sure I don't want to repeat that experience. I recommend you follow my example."

Erik listened to him carefully and nodded. "So if I'm to sell these to Paul Boyton, you won't mind, given our agreement?"

"I would mind, but that's irrelevant to our deal. I'd rather you sell them to Tilyou. He seems like the more far-sighted one out of the two. A good head for business, but hasn't sold his soul to the devil yet."

He nodded again. Alina had heard of both Boyton and Tilyou, and she was not sure if Erik was testing him, but what he said was true. Tilyou did seem to have a healthy head on his shoulders. Not to mention he offered to help financially with the schools and orphanages they were trying to build if his plans turned profitable enough. Oh, this might all come together so nicely. Has he planned all this?

Jack continued, "Of course, given your apparent disgust towards representing yourself, I'd do it for my fair share of the money. I even know old George myself. I'd give him the blueprints and we'd all get a percentage of profits, fairly. It's not even a question."

That was it, then. This went perfectly. I'm amazed.

"It's agreed, then," Erik said.

"Oh, goodie. The fair maiden and the mysterious knight are on my side. We'll slay all the dragons easily now." Jack, I smiled. "Seriously, though, it'll be a pleasure doing business with you."

"You too, Jack," Alina replied politely, even though she was not exactly crucial for this part of the business.

"Oh, heavens above, Alina! I'm glad you've changed your opinion of me. I'm not such an unflattering mirror after all, am I?" On second thought, Jack, go fall off a cliff.

The way Erik looked at him made Alina think he was wishing for the same thing.

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Now that that was settled, Erik threw himself wholeheartedly into his blueprints. Alina gave Jack the rest of the toys they'd made and he sold them remarkably fast; he patented their designs and started manufacturing them in large amounts. They sold very well, and he shared the money fairly every week. Alina started pulling some sleeves and some favors, gathering recommendations, and Jack even put in a good word for her with Tilyou as well. She wanted to participate in the school project; she was prepared to put money, time, and energy into it and it showed. It helped that

she knew a lot of the children as well. The whole system was lazy and slow, but Alina found within her some firmness and confidence she didn't know she had. Eventually, they appointed her as one of the teachers; they put them all in a small, barely-passable building. It wasn't much, but they could work. Some of the children were promising, and Alina remembered every result and every victory for when she would negotiate better resources and more funding. This is important, she argued, and Jack sometimes argued alongside her. Kids who stay in school have no time to be criminals. Kids who know the language can find jobs. Don't you want this? We need the money. We need the support.

Slowly but surely, they started to listen. Schools got better equipment – not much better, but a fair start. Orphanages got more blankets and more workers. Alina argued some more so that they would give proper education to the workers. Some boundaries were set. The children were always fed, always welcome, and never beaten. She talked to the workers and voiced out their complaints until they got some days free and some support from older, more experienced people who would supervise them. Tilyou, you supported it, motivated by the money that might pour into his pockets when he saw Erik's unfinished designs. Erik's shoulder finally healed after a while and he slowly regained movement in his arm; he started playing violin again as soon as the cast was off. The melodies were now slightly less dark, more hopeful, and lighter. Sometimes, when Alina would arrive early, she could faintly hear something sweet and romantic, but it stopped abruptly every time as soon as she entered the house.

Jack was less insufferable than Alina had previously thought. He was good with money – incredible, even. And he really could sell anything to anyone. It made her wonder why he bothered with this schooling project; he was putting a lot of energy into it.

"It's about public image, Alina. This kind of thing is good for business. Makes us appear all saint-like. Humanitarian and whatnot," he explained.

"It's not just that, is it? Do you believe in what we're saying?" Alina was quite sure of it.

"Do I? Are you trying to peel my skin and take a peek, fair maiden? I assure you, if you do, I'll still be a snake underneath," he laughed.

"That's not true. I'm sorry I acted that way."

"That's surprisingly mature of you, princess. I remember being like you. I was full of big, powerful words and had a big, powerful heart. Bled it all over this country in my younger days."

"What happened?"

"What do you think happened? Life happened. I realized some things. Have you seen this city yet?"

Alina nodded. She knew what he was talking about.

"Well, I've lived here all my life. Have you noticed how people talk a whole lot about the good old days when all you needed to succeed in Coney Island was cheap liquor, a bag of bribe money, and some fine ladies to rob your customers?"

She noticed that.

"Well, not everyone was ready to do that. My folks got screwed over pretty badly. And once you fall, the dogs smell it. Mafia blackmailed every last penny out of them. And some blood."

"That's horrible. I'm sorry."

"Point is, it teaches you to take care of yourself, alright? I've seen a lot of this country. I did a lot of investigative journalism, too. Scum is everywhere. It's like a weed or cockroach. You can't kill them. You don't even know the full extent of it, because you walk with your face to the sun. All I want is to keep the vermin out of my goddamn house. Expensive house, if possible."

"Why do you care about this, then?"

"Because he started, and stopped. He looked... tired. "After you came, the little delinquent Russian kids started speaking this horrible version of English all of a sudden. One of them taught it to his older brother, and his older brother came to me asking for work. I didn't need anybody but I knew someone in construction who did. The kid still works there."

"Oh. Nikolai, is he still working on that construction site?"

"I won't say this again, and I'll deny it forever, but... you might be on to something. I'm too tired to do what you do, and frankly, you're too naïve and sometimes annoying in this whole idealistic Oliver Twist narrative you have. But it seems to be doing something. So I'll help you."

"Oh. That's... thank you. I won't mention it again, to save your gruff gritty persona."

They walked silently for a while. Alina could faintly hear the sound of a violin in the distance.

"Has your darling always been this eccentric?" Jack asked.

"I've only known him a little less than a year. But from what I've heard, he used to be much worse." The choice of words didn't escape her. "He's not my darling, though."

"No? Are you kidding? Is that why you live together and finish each other's sentences?"

"We don't find-"

"Sounds to me like you're practically married, already. Why are you skipping the fun part of it?"

"We're not! It's not like that!" Alina felt her cheeks getting hot. "Go fall into a ditch, Jack!"

"You've had better ones. My favorite was when you told me to step on a garden rake. Simple, yet picturesque."

"You can still do that." Please, Jack, do that.

"No, I've been curious about eternity now, and I want to know. If you don't tell me, I'll fish it out of him. I'm a journalist, remember?"

"There's nothing to fish out! Ask him if you want! I bet he doesn't even notice it!" Oh, no. Did I just say that? He can't do that. Jack had that smug look on his face again, and Alina started to panic.

"Alright, maiden, you can calm down. Your fair knight has some spikes in his armor, I noticed. Doesn't change the fact he would still die for you."

Alina was still silently panicking.

"I'll drop the subject now, OK? But it's true. If you both just get your heads out of your asses, you'll see. And then you can have some fun. Trust me."

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She was ruined.

Jack had put a bug in her ear, and now she couldn't think about anything else. She had to excuse herself to pace around the beach nervously. She must have crossed it a hundred times already, but she was not done with thinking.

She had been successful at steering clear of this kind of nonsense all her life. She had good reasons too. She had her plans and ambitions on one side, and her stupid fears of duty and commitment and being trapped in the life of a trophy woman and/or becoming my parents on the other. Alina avoided potential husbands like the plague all her life. She had no intention of risking to sacrifice everything she was – especially now that she finally had a good idea of it – just to find, I don't know, love or lust or security, or whatever else makes women so eager to get a nice man and change their last name. She was doing well enough so far, although she'd felt and craved all of those things, and at times suffered for it.

Contrary to a rather prevalent opinion, Alina's heart was not made of stone. It was just carefully wrapped, stored away, and suppressed so it wouldn't get in the way of other things. The last time she let some handsome young man know she even had a heart, she was around seventeen and the whole thing ended even before it started because the brave young lad was, as Alina found out on time, under the impression wives were just maids one wouldn't have to pay for. While she had

never looked down upon maids, she looked down upon unpaid labor. And it seemed like most men did not approve of her wanting to continue her way of living until I goddamn decide to stop it myself; not to mention most men were not such fascinating creatures once she got to know them enough. Alina had dear male friends and role models, but no one she wanted to keep near her forever or some other romantic nonsense.

Until now, that is.

She was inclined to think she'd been more or less successful at hiding everything from Erik so far because she was under the impression he had no such interest in her. It was quite clear he considered her important; he seemed to trust her and seek out her company more often than she'd expect of someone so peculiar and withdrawn. But if he did think – feel – something more, she hadn't noticed until now; although looking back some things that he'd done to cast a different light on everything now that she knew this. Jack had noticed it on his own and Alina couldn't see why he would lie to her.

It was hard to throw excuses such as "keeping her own ambitions" when the man in question had been rather persistently trying to help her with said ambitions and not demanding anything she wouldn't do. And it was hard to say he was not interested enough for her to want to keep him in her life when I'm so blatantly, stupidly fascinated –

I'm in love. It was a bizarre notion and Alina didn't know a curse in English that would adequately describe how she felt about it, so she had to resort to her native language for a second.

She was in love with a man who was strange, specific, and hard to understand. Not to mention a social outcast and

very noticeably disfigured underneath that mask. Alina never cared about wealth or social status that much, but she had thought she cared about – beauty. Can it be called that? There was something undeniably attractive to her about him, in that strange way men can be attractive when they're not beautiful. Something about his eyes made Alina want to look at them all the time; something about his voice made her wish he'd never stop talking and singing and something about his long, thin hands made her wonder how they'd feel wrapped around her. Even spinsters and shrews like me want to be kissed. I may owe some money to Amelija since that settles our ancient bet.

I'm ruined, yes. What will I do?

Normally, her first thought would be to pack her bags and run. But she couldn't even consider it. Not just because of the life she'd built in this very godforsaken corner of New York, which was finally starting to go her way. The thought of going home to a house where Erik wasn't playing his violin, furiously drawing his projects, or waiting for her to discuss something with that strangely mixed attitude of gentle understanding and sardonic remarks filled her with dread. She felt as if it would leave a hole somewhere inside her she'd feel for the rest of her days.

There was a very sad folk song back in Alina's homeland that she now felt she understood. The singer tells of how he planted his love like a violet inside his heart, and it has since grown so many roots that ripping it out might rip his heart in two along with it. From what Alina could remember, the only thing he could do was to either let it grow or let it wilt on its own.

I suppose that's my answer. It's beyond my control now and I can't do much but water it at this point. I only hope this won't end with a handful of dead flowers in my goddamn chest.

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The world does keep turning even when one is occupied with their problems, and Alina realized she hadn't visited Yana in a while. She decided to do just that and head towards her house the next day.

"Hello, Alina."

"Yana! What's wrong? You look... tired." And, sad.

"I am tired." She leads her into her house.

"What's happening?"

"It's working. They're putting everything on me. More work all the time, but nothing good about it. I keep doing everything hoping they'll put me as a baker instead, but they just throw promises and nothing happens yet."

"I'm so sorry! Do you need help? Maybe we could-"

"No, Alina", she sighed. "I don't need help. I need to do this on my own for now. You can't fix everything for everyone. I can fight for myself, I just need more time. Until then, life was a mess."

Well, she's right, Alina thought. I can't fix her life. But I can still do something.

"Maybe Erik and I could watch Pjotr more often so you can rest – or you and I could go on walks together, or have tea

more often. You'll feel better when you have something nice to look forward to."

"That... would be good." She sighed again.
"I missed you, Alina. Everything is so dramatic with you, but nothing is so serious that I could lose my job if I say something wrong. It does cheer me up talking to someone."

"I missed you too!" I'm not that dramatic. "Do you want to tell me to trash about other workers? I won't tell anyone, I swear, I love hearing about this stuff. You'll feel better."

"Really?"

"Yes, as you've so cleverly noticed, I thrive on drama. What else would explain my choice of books?"

Yana smiled mischievously for the first time since Alina arrived. "You're right. You need to be watered like a plant. Except for tears and stories."

"That's a very appropriate and unfortunate comparison, but I'll take it."

"Something is bothering you, too. Will you tell me?" Alina always forgot how perceptive Yana was. She'd be surprised if she hadn't already guessed what was bothering her, but she was not quite ready to discuss it yet.

"I'll tell you another time, alright? I need to settle it with myself first. And you have more interesting things to complain about, I'm sure."

"Alright. I'll get us something to drink and I'll tell you everything. You'll love it."

Chapter 7:Happiness

November 1884, Paris

"Erik, why did you avoid me for so long?"

"Because you were angry."

"I wasn't. Why would I be?"

"You seemed angry."

"Hmm." She looked at him with confusion, furrowing her brow. "What made you think that?"

"I don't know. Your voice. And...He trailed off. He didn't know how he knew that; he just did.

"And what did you think I was angry about?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. She sat in silence, stubbornly waiting for him to answer. "Maybe because I was... bad."

"Bad?"

"I stole the manager's sweets." Which he saw no problem with, seeing as he was surviving exclusively off of stolen things at that moment. He had nothing that he'd bought, earned, or received other than a set of clothes and one pair of gloves Antoinette gave him when she first brought him home.

"I told you, I wasn't angry about that. And you started avoiding me long before."

"I was bad long before that," he blurted out, not thinking. She was looking at him intently now.

"Don't stare at"

"How long? Tell me honestly. Since when have you been bad?"

"Always. Since always."

She shook her head, looking like she was going to cry. Maybe she finally understood the truth.

"If some other boy – someone who wasn't bad since always – was in your place, do you think I'd be angry with him? That I would have any reasonable cause to be so angry, that he'd have to be afraid and avoid me?"

"No."

"So you were afraid of me simply because you thought I'd realized you're just bad and have always been?"

He didn't want to answer that question. He got up and finished the conversation. She tugged on his shirt lightly, trying to pull him to sit back.

"Wait just a minute, and then you can go. Just listen."

Maybe he could. He was bored without her anyway, and after he left he would have to wait several days before he could speak to her again.

"I think we've had a misunderstanding. But I have an idea how to resolve those in the future."

He nodded.

"Whenever you think I'm angry or something like that, or you're just not sure how I feel, just pretend, or imagine, that instead of you I'm talking to some other boy like I just described. Someone who's not bad. And then you'll know."

"That's stupid. I'm not some other boy." Or a boy in general, he thought. I'm closer to an animal.

"I know you think that, but I don't think that. So just try. If you can't believe it, just pretend you're a normal boy I'm visiting and talking to. I promise you'll never misunderstand me if you do that. Can you try, maybe? You have nothing to lose."

"I could try."

"Thank you." She smiled," „It'll work, I promise."

November 1894, Coney Island

Erik felt so relieved on the day he finally got his arm back that he thought he might break into song and dance as the doctor took the immobilizing cast off of him. He was so beside himself that he barely even noticed that the man was too close to him and touching his shoulder. He wanted to scale a cliff with his bare hands; he had been so trapped in the cast and his head that this small victory overwhelmed him with joy. Seeing as his head was still a mess, having all of his appendages back would have to be enough for now, even if his arm might take some time to regain its previous functionality.

The past few months have been disturbing to Erik, to put it mildly. He was quite certain they had been disturbing to people around him as well. This goddamn episode had stirred some things inside him that he thought he had pushed deep enough not to ever encounter again, and yet, at the first loss of control over this safe little world he had created they resurfaced just the same. He'd lost control over his body, over his mind, and as he had come to realize, over his heart as well.

Erik spent weeks after the robbery incident waiting for Alina to finally come to her senses and realize she needed to get out of there and out of his vicinity, but she stubbornly persisted even as he made a fool of himself in his dramatic misery. He could not fathom why she was still here, he could not imagine her thinking of him as anything but a monster now that she had seen – and heard – all of that. But she was still here, with that same warm

demeanor even after she'd seen his disfigured face and as the thought finally settled in his thick skull, he'd decided it would be better if he made it worth her while.

The only catharsis that came for Erik out of that whole period was the realization that he did care for Alina. Even as he argued with her and avoided her, the thought of her leaving filled him with dread and he had no more energy to pretend otherwise. He had to admit it at least to himself, seeing as he would never be able to admit it to her, that he loved her. It was a simple truth, but immense in its implications, and once it was out in the open it tinted everything around him with its colorful, dreadful brushstrokes. He thought about it as she left in the mornings and he wished to take her hand and ask her to stay a little longer, he thought about it during the day when she wasn't there and he wished to hear her voice and he thought about it in the evenings when she came back and he wished to bury his face in her soft, dark hair. It took an insane amount of composure not to reveal what he was thinking. He had resigned himself to simply watching from a distance, terrified of what would happen if he gave any of it away. He had already been given more than he had hoped for. He had no wish to destroy it with his greedy, selfish tendencies.

It was work that occupied Erik in the end and pulled him out of his wallowing. It provided a healthy distraction from things he could not bear to think about. He threw himself into sketching, constructing, and bringing to life numerous illusions and tricks and it gave him a sense of competence and confidence he had otherwise been lacking lately. Having a new partner where there had only been two of them so far was a sudden, drastic change, but Jack proved to be skilled, adaptable, and smart enough for them all to find a way to cooperate. Erik had to admit everything was much easier now – nothing shook Jack; he was completely calm through situations that would send Alina or Erik spiraling into frustration and anger, and he had a certain sense of business that made negotiating and presenting Erik's ideas end up well-received most times. He was also, thankfully, completely uninterested in Alina in any romantic way. In Erik's mind, he could already see the two of them together when Alina first came to him with the idea to include Jack; it made him panic for days. It seemed, however, that that would not happen at all.

Still, the dynamics shifted noticeably and they all had to get used to it. Jack turned out to be less infuriating than they had previously imagined. Alina and Erik both had to admit they'd grown somewhat fond of his amusing presence and his constant torrent of words. Jack seemed to enjoy their company as well, even as he kept his distance and appeared to sometimes simply observe them with amusement like actors on a stage.

With all that, Alina and Erik finally had some time to breathe since the immense amount of things that still had to be done was split between three people instead of two. Alina started going on more walks and spending time with Yana again. They saved most of their money so they could get a decent living, but the small amount she did spend, she used new books and clothes. The small change left a great impact on her – she walked straight again, with more confidence; her eyes had a spark in them whenever she had enough time to read. The two of them also had time to talk again in the evenings, and she often asked Erik to play or sing something for her. He would often oblige, and even though he couldn't make himself express what he wanted to, it would sometimes slip out of him as a gentle shift in melodies and atmospheres. He could never tell if she noticed it or not, but she would be enchanted by the music nevertheless. She would praise him with excitement after every composition and he shamelessly enjoyed it.

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Winter came again, and one cold morning Erik woke up to see a soft white blanket on the ground.

The world has a way of coming to a standstill on snowy mornings, he thought looking out the window. All movement outside was slow, all sound was muffled. He stood quietly by the window, enjoying the scene. It was ethereal, serene, and he wanted to savor the moment.

Behind him, the door to Alina's room opened abruptly with a loud bang and she practically ran out, in her nightdress and her hair down and messy, still holding her blanket around her. She stormed through the room to the window where he was standing in a second, opened it, and leaned outside.

"FIRST SNOW!" she started laughing excitedly, eyes sparkling and hair flowing around her face.

Erik's ears hurt, so he automatically brought his fingers to rub his temples. "What are you yelling for? Everyone knows."

"THE SKY!" she held her arms high, above her.

"I'm sure the sky is aware, as well."

"I'm expressing my gratitude!" She kept laughing, leaning through. The cold air bit her eventually, so she begrudgingly got inside and closed the window. She looked at Erik, still messy and unkempt, and so, so happy; it was so contagious. He considered grabbing her for a moment and spinning her around, but he just smiled.

"What is this sudden outburst for? You've seen snow before."

She beamed at him. "I love it! It's beautiful! This is my favorite season!" she stormed off to put water on the stove, for coffee.

"I was just thinking that when you ruined my moment." Erik chuckled. "It was very romantic before you stormed in, like a cavalry."

"Nonsense! I am the messenger of joy and love!" she laughed before, settling down. "Amelija, and I would always get a little crazy this time of year. I love snow, and holidays are coming soon, and I hope you're aware I will make a very big deal out of it all."

I'm afraid to ask. "In what way?"

"I will decorate the house, and you'll help me." He didn't care about decorating or holidays for that matter, but she was so happy he might do it. "I'll get us some nice wine for a change, and I'll make cakes, traditional ones so if you don't eat them you'll be offending my entire culture. And then my great-grandma's ghost will come and haunt you."

"I won't notice the difference. What's one more Borichevich pestering me every day?"

She slapped his arm lightly in that same manner Antoinette used to. "That's not fair! I'm nice! Granny would just follow you around telling you to comb your hair and trying to correct your posture."

"The same, then."

Rolling her eyes, she continued. "There will be presents as well. I'm trying to think of something for Yana, and maybe Jack. I already have yours."

"I don't want- you already have it?" This took him by surprise; he wasn't expecting one and didn't know how to react to it. "What is it?"

"I'm not going to tell you, you spoiled child! December barely started, you're getting it on Christmas day like the rest of us!"

"Sorry, I just didn't think – I had no idea you'd get me something. I don't have anything for you yet." He suddenly became aware of how pathetic that probably sounds. "Why are you even doing this?"

"Because I want to. You're dear to me and you're getting a gift, and that's the end of it." She crossed her arms, trying to look strict, but he could see a blush creeping up her face, slowly and adorably. Erik couldn't help but smile at the sight.

"I'll just have to take this seriously, then. Is there anything you wish for specifically?"

"I don't know – you don't have to get me anything! But if you want to, I'll be happy, whatever you choose. It's the sentiment that counts, isn't it?"

"I suppose so." Was he brave enough to give her something that would show his actual sentiment? He would have to think about it. Meanwhile, they needed to go. "You should hurry with that coffee. Jack is waiting for us. I need to give him the new papers, and you need to discuss finances with Tilyou."

"I'll be ready in a moment."

She won't, of course. Erik took some more time to enjoy this morning while she got dressed. She came out of her room just as he decided to try knocking, wearing a familiar fur hat.

"Hello, again. I forgot you did that hat."

"I forgot where I put it, which is why it took so long. I haven't worn it since February," she looked into the window to fix her hair. Maybe it's time I bought us a mirror. "It's so strange, remembering when I last had it. We just arrived, remember? Everything has changed so much."

"You're right. I haven't thought of it before. It's like a different lifetime."

"Yes. This city was so strange to me, you were so strange to me, when I think about it, I completely forgot about that, these days I'm much happier and much less confused around you," she said quickly in one breath, hoping she wouldn't blush again, and turned around. "Alright, we can go."

Lately, she had been planting subtle remarks like these often when she talked to him. Erik couldn't tell what she meant by them, but he savored them just the same. Maybe he could be a tiny bit more open as well, he decided. She was right: a year ago he couldn't have imagined this, the two of them as friends and her smiling at him so often. Times had indeed changed; it might be time for him to shift as well.

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As the weather grew cold, the children grew jittery and tired. They wanted to be left home for the holidays; not to mention it was harder for them to get up for school on cold dark mornings. Alina could understand them. She had to think of new ways to make them interested, so she organized different activities – she made all the kids write little essays on how they celebrate seasonal holidays, and she took them on small trips around so they could play in the snow during the day and let out the extra energy. She wanted the school to have a choir, but they needed someone to lead them, someone to teach them and someone to arrange the songs. She realized Erik could probably write them down for her and arrange them, but she'd have to let someone else lead them. Since they were all very busy already, she'd have

to put that on hold for now. Especially since some of the kids don't even have proper winter clothing. The school had to organize and get them some; every time Alina would see a child shivering on the way to school she wanted to scream and break things. So she went door-to-door asking people to donate. She organized sales, and events in the school, to get enough old children's clothes so that they didn't have to freeze in class. She had to engage in several more arguments with her benefactors who seemed to think she was just demanding more and more nonsense from them, not realizing a child couldn't learn to read and write if they were dying of whooping cough or tuberculosis. The results were not perfect, but they were something. The worst of winter would come after Christmas, after all. If she kept pressing people, she hoped they'd have enough by then. Alina thought the poor kids' parents would complain and get offended when she offered them spare clothing, but to her surprise, they were mostly... to put it frankly, more people gave her teary hugs than she had ever expected them to. It was uncomfortable, sometimes, but Alina had to admit – she liked being appreciated for something she'd put a lot of effort into.

Jack closed his shop shortly after the first snowfall; tourists barely came this late in the year. He mostly stayed with them helping Erik or discussing nuances with Tilyou. The park was said to open in late spring; Jack was overseeing some of the work to make sure they were following Erik's instructions carefully. He showed Alina some of them – there was a whole attraction which was essentially a maze made of moving mirrors controlled by one hidden operator, and several other – obstacle courses, so to speak. He'd designed various buildings and a Ferris wheel, and he'd added more mechanical toys and instruments that play on their own. Alina was amazing.

"How did you learn to do this? When? This is is... I don't know, I'm speechless. How are you so good at so many things?"I couldn't stop looking at them.

"I picked it up, here and there. I found the blueprints of the Opera building, they kept them after it was made. I watched how they made things back at the circus because I had nothing better to do. Besides, I read a lot. I always have. I used to steal all the books I could find when I couldn't get them through normal means."

"This is incredible. You're very talented." She finally tore away from the plans, to look at him.

"It's nothing. I just... I learned it. I had nothing to do." He fumbled a bit, adjusting his mask, scratching the back of his head.

"A lot of people have nothing to do, but they don't learn to make such amazing things. Give yourself some credit." Alina was beginning to realize she shouldn't insist on complimenting him too much because he seemed to be physically unable to accept it. It still means something. We should tell him nice things more often. He doesn't seem to be aware at all.

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Amelija,

I'm writing to tell you two things – first of all, you won another bet. I'm not going to tell you which one because I want you to suffer a little more before you find out.

Second, I want to wish you a merry Christmas. Today I woke up to the first snow this season, and I thought of you. I'm sorry we can't spend this Christmas together – but I'll be making our traditional cookies so at least the Yankees will learn SOME proper culture. Bastards wouldn't know olive oil from lard and coffee from... Whatever it is they drink. I miss real Turkish coffee. I'll be making those little folded paper stars grandma taught us how to make – if I can still remember how we made them, of course. Pray for me.

I'm going to celebrate with some friends I've made here - I wish you could meet them, I think you'd like them. Erik is very Erik agreed to help me with the Christmas celebration and I fully intend to take advantage of him. I'm inviting Yana as well – I hope her job moves from this standstill soon – and Jack, I have a feeling you'd love Jack, he reminds me a bit of you (by which I mean he has a big mouth and he's very annoying). We should arrange for you to come to visit sometime when we get a nicer house.

How are you doing? How are mama and tata? Send them my love if they're done ignoring me, but if they're not, just let them stew some more. I hope you'll have a nice Christmas this year; although I'd say it will be quite boring without me there to be snappy and inappropriate. Tell cousin Jelka I'm betting your hairpins on mama being the center of the first argument this year.

Love,

Alina.

Alina knew how to make the little folded paper stars. She knew how to make them, she just had to remember the steps. She'd done this a thousand times and she still forgets every year. I don't know how to make them anymore. I have to remember how to make them! She threw her hands in frustration, looking at the table filled with small strips of paper. Many of them were crumpled up or ripped, and others folded in unfinished star shapes. Now she'd have to clean this all up.

"Do you need any help with that?" Erik offered from his side of the table, not looking up from his drawings.

"No, I just... We used to make them every year, and every year I forget how they're made, and then I have to guess it step-by-step again. It's harder without mama and Amelija. I think Amelija knows now." She stared at the paper, stubbornly.

"You could just ask her."

"Yes, I could," she nodded, „but her answer won't arrive on time. I want to have some for Christmas."

"It doesn't matter that much. You can make other decorations, and I'm sure it'll still be lovely," he said absentmindedly.

"It does matter!" the stupid paper strips were infuriating, to look at. "It matters because we all used to make them together, and now they're all

thousands of miles away and I have to make them so I don't forget!" she felt her vision, getting blurry.

He looked up for the first time. "So you won't forget?"

"So I won't forget what we did! No one here... on this backward continent does it the same way! I know there are Croats here but I'm not around them much! They have different habits, and different faces, and no one here knows how to make paper stars! And now I can't just go back and ask how exactly we did it!"

"Do you want to? Go back?"

Alina sighed. "No. I just want to remember where I came from. What these holidays used to mean to me and the people in my hometown. I don't want to forget who I am. And these... things, these traditions, have always been important to Amelija, and... I miss her, that's all. I miss them all."

He was looking at her, but once again Alina couldn't tell what he was thinking through the goddamn mask.

"What else did you make? Aside from the stars?"

"We would put a wreath on the table with four candles, and light one each Sunday," she started to remember. Erik noticed her eyes glinting slightly. "And we'd plant wheat on st. Lucy, and then it would grow by Christmas. And we'd put a big fire branch somewhere in the living room and decorate it because no one wanted to bother chopping down a tree. And we'd sing a lot, Christmas songs and whatnot. Amelija loves to sing. We both do", she concluded, smiling.

"How do you say 'Merry Christmas' in Croatia?"

"Sretan Božić."

He repeated it back, only semi-horribly.

"That's not bad," she laughed in surprise, "You have a good ear for languages. Maybe that's why you learned English so fast."

"I wasn't that bad at English, to begin with," he shrugged. "I had never spoken about it, but I could understand it, and read it. I taught myself a little. I would say my problem wasn't speaking English, so much as speaking in general."

"What do you mean?" Alina asked, confused. "You speak just fine. Always have."

"And yet, when we met, I barely spoke to anyone at all."

"That's true.", she nodded, recalling it. "I thought it was just a preference. But you seemed... withdrawn. And miserable."

He leaned back, scratching his chin. "You're not wrong. I just don't have the habit of making contact with people. I always dealt with things on my own. When I met Antoinette I didn't speak at all, even though I knew how, because I didn't think I would gain anything from it."

"Oh. I can't imagine being like that. I nag people wherever I go."

"That I've noticed." One corner of his mouth twitched upwards. "It doesn't bother me that much, not speaking French. I only spoke to Antoinette anyway. But someone like you who talks all the time must be suffering."

"Thank you very much." Arse, sir.

"You can teach me some Croatian if you want, and those songs you mentioned; and I can teach you some French. Would that make this backward continent seem friendlier to you?"

"But Croatian is a nightmare to learn. Why would you want that?" Alina frowned.

"I don't have to. I just thought it might mean something to you." he leaned forward again, taking his pencil. "Forget, I said it."

"It would! Yes!" "Why, are you so sensitive?" "If you want to. It would be nice. It would be as though I'm... Keep my family's traditions, but go forward instead of back. Building new customs upon old ones."

"I had that in mind, yes." He squinted at her," "I'll help you with all this if it means something to you. But stop forcing me to eat, it's annoying."

"Forcing people to eat is the most important of Slavic holiday traditions, Erik. It's the only way we know how to tell someone we love them," she blurted out. In any other context, this would be hilarious. It's still kind of hilarious if you forget how mortifying it is.

He was just staring at her, wide-eyed. Alina felt her face suddenly getting very hot. I need a distraction before I spontaneously combust it.

"That is, my mother always forces people to eat and always makes too much of everything and then it's a whole competition with our aunts in who will spoil their guests the most and I think I remember how to make these stars, I've been folding them the wrong way, Amelija is right-handed so she does it differently, I'll just have to flip them if I do them with my left." She fiddled stubbornly with the paper in her hand, hoping she'd get a papercut and bleed out to death.

He was still staring at her. Stop it, stop it, stop it –

"So, in any case, uh, what do people in France do to celebrate Christmas?"

He blinked. "I wouldn't know. I lived alone. Giry would visit sometimes and bring me gifts, but that is all."

"I'll just assimilate you into my family, then. You're now one of us. You're welcome to make the paper stars and eat the cookies." This is not making the situation less mortifying, just close your mouth you stupid –

For whatever insane reason, Erik took some paper and started folding it.

"You'll have to show me what you're doing. I'm left-handed as well and this is all wrong."

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The next morning Alina woke up and entered the kitchen to find dozens of paper stars; on the counter, hanging from the ceiling, somehow attached to

the walls, with a small pile on the table as well.

And in the middle of the pile, Erik was sleeping in a chair, his head on the table and buried in his arms.

A wave of affection washed over Alina and she stopped for a moment to appreciate the scene. His thin shoulders were moving slightly with his breathing, his hair messy and disheveled. It's much too cold this morning for you to be sleeping covered only in that shirt.

I don't see him like this often, Alina realized. He was either very controlled or let himself go when something horrible happened (though Alina was willing to bet he was still controlling himself when she was around on those occasions). But right now, he was just relaxed. Peaceful. When was the last time he slept peacefully? Alina had no idea, but right now he was sleeping like a child with his head in his arms, surrounded by paper stars. It was an unimaginably sweet scene. She could not tear her eyes off him. When we met, I thought you were frightened. How strange.

Alina didn't want to wake him, but she didn't want him to freeze either, so she took the blanket from her bed and lightly lowered it over his shoulders. He stirred a little; she worried he might wake up seeing as he was such a light sleeper. But to her surprise, he settled down and pulled the blanket more tightly around himself. She reached out, automatically, to lightly stroke his back.

That did wake him up; his head jerked up and he looked at her, half-asleep and half-alarmed. He didn't pull away, just stared at her with his eyes wide under the mask and his hair disheveled; completely still and stiff as a board.

Alina then did something she hadn't done in years: she acted on a momentary impulse, not thinking about the consequences of her actions. His mask was slightly shifted, exposing a thin strip of visible skin on his time between the mask and his hairline. Reaching out, Alina lowered her head a little more and lightly brushed her lips against the bare skin. He moved away a tiny bit at first and she half-expected him to flinch and back away; but he just sat there, still completely stiff, his eyes following her intently.

She backed away, and Erik still hadn't moved at all. He appeared to be completely shocked by her actions; wide-eyed with his mouth slightly open. She tried to study his expression to see how he felt, but he didn't look displeased by this. Just surprised. The silence and the stillness were so absolute that she could feel her heartbeat drumming in her ears and see his breath growing quicker and more frantic.

Then Alina did something even more reckless.

She bent her head once more, this time brushing her lips against his, leaving them there for just a second. The mask was right above his mouth and she could feel the edge of it, but his bare lips felt surprisingly soft and warm, even though he wasn't moving at all. He didn't return the kiss so she backed away slowly and straightened herself, feeling somewhat embarrassed. Rejected, even. I may have overstepped the line. This may have been too soon. I wasn't thinking.

As she straightened back up, he slowly brought up his hand to his lips, as if he was checking if it happened. He kept still for another moment, then stood up in one swift and panicked movement, leaned in toward her, and, gripping her shoulders with his hands, kissed her back.

Alina's head swirled a little. She forgot how intense he was, and, well, how tall. He was suddenly towering over her and leaning down to reach her; kissing her clumsily and frantically. She needed to steady herself so she wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him close. This made him less panicked, but no less intense. Alina could feel her drumming heartbeat and his raspy breathing, his mouth clashing with hers, and his hands wrapped around her back and holding on for dear life, and it all became a blur of sensations so overwhelming she forgot about everything else for a moment.

When he finally pulled away, she felt like she'd crashed on the ground from a very high cliff. Erik looked like he was expecting something horrifying to happen now, staring at her in shock and alarm. Alina realized she only had a little time before he opened his mouth to say some complete nonsense and ruined this moment. She forced herself to think quickly, even though there was nothing but thick fog where her mind should be. Very thick, happy fog. She simply did the fog's bidding and wrapped her arms around his back,

hugging him tightly, and buried her face on his shoulder. He followed and held his arms around her lightly.

"Good morning. I see you've been busy last night." She said, purposely making her voice quiet and gentle, so hopefully, he wouldn't get paranoid.

He was silent.

"Can you explain to me how you made several thousand of these in one night?"

"Fifty-three", he whispered in a strangely weak, high voice.

"That's too many. You'll go blind."

"I've gone mad instead."

Alina pulled away to face him. He was calmer now, but still nervous. She could understand that. This whole morning was overwhelming to her as well. But he was looking at her sadly now, as though he was already resigned to her fainting or screaming. Or disappearing into thin air, it seemed.

She couldn't help but smile. "I'm unfamiliar with this kind of madness, but it's very pleasant. I might not want you to get better, how unprofessional of me."

Erik tried to laugh and choked a little. "Isn't that exactly what a hallucination would say?"

It was her turn to laugh now. "Fair point." She could feel him relaxing, a little.

He shook his head. "Forgive me. This all feels unreal." It didn't seem to him like she was scared, disgusted, or anything like that, but he was still worried. "Are you alright? Did I -?

"I am perfectly fine," she interrupted before she could find out what he thought he'd done. I can only do this right if I'm not a coward. So I should

act like... not a coward. "I have to admit I've been wishing for this for some time," she felt her cheeks getting hot.

What followed had to be the longest embarrassing silence of her entire life.

"Are you alright?" she asked, unsure what to think about his shocked staring.

"I'm..."

A loud knock at the door startled them both, and they automatically let go.

Yana burst in with loud enthusiasm untypical for her and smiled mischievously when she saw them. "Hello, Alina. Did you settle what was bothering you?"

Alina couldn't think of a real answer, but the look she and Erik exchanged was enough for Yana to figure it out. She decided not to comment on anything for now.

"I have good news. One of the bakers is sick, and they need someone to fill in, and I offered to do it. This might be a good chance for me."

ooo

Erik was walking on clouds; his head was made of cotton and fog. Everything was soft. He couldn't find other words for it. He felt as though every part of his body that Alina had touched had shredded its skin and exposed raw flesh underneath; he could still feel her lips on his.

Yana came in and started talking to Alina and he couldn't hear a damned thing. The only thing he could do was sit by the table and pretend, pathetically, that everything was normal.

From what he could gather they were talking about Yana's work. This was a topic he was usually very invested in; he wished her to be happy and he'd talked to her several times about ways for her to move upward and get what she wanted. She'd been very stubborn in refusing anyone's help and doing this on her own.

Today he was too distracted by the soft cotton and stupidity in his head to listen. Yana noticed it, her eyes darting from Alina to Erik and back.

Outside, snow started to fall into large, sluggish flakes, mirroring the white clouds in Erik's head. He decided this might be an opportunity to get a moment alone and clear his mind.

"It looks like we're about to have a very cold day. I'll go get some more wood." Alina's eyes followed him, as he got up. "Don't mind me, I'll be right back. I'm sure you have some catching up to do." He wrapped his scarf around his head and neck and put on his cloak. They were still hesitant, but Yana seemed to have caught on so she just kept talking until Alina relaxed as well.

Erik exhaled for the first time as he finally stepped outside, into the silent, blinding white. He let out a long, slow breath and some of the fog in his mind escaped, turning into white mist as it exits his mouth.

As his mind cleared a bit, he started to panic, walking in circles. What am I doing? What is going on? More importantly, what should I do now? Why did she do that? Why did I do that? What does she want from me? Is she that delusional to not see who I am? Do I have the strength to tell her the truth?

He forced himself to walk in a straight line, away from the house.

Start from the beginning. The only woman that had ever kissed Erik until now made her disgust and contempt for him very clear. There was no doubt as to why she'd done it and he had sworn to himself he'd never end up in that situation again. It was enough to know he'd never get that kind of affection from someone; getting a twisted mockery of what he wanted to remind him of what he deserved – no, that was too much.

But Alina had nothing to gain from this. He was not keeping her here. He'd made it very clear to her, for this very reason, that she could leave at any time, that she owed nothing to him, that he expected nothing from her. Of course, the truth was that while he expected nothing from her, he

also wished for a great many things, but he had no intention of revealing that openly to her.

This is insane. I'm a deformed, disfigured mockery of a man. She knows what's under the mask. There is no chance she – anyone – would just get over that so easily. This is not a lovely story. This is not „Pride and Prejudice" and I am in no way just a misunderstood complex soul that will turn out to be a perfectly normal, respectable man as soon as she digs deeper –

But she might not know that. He felt physical pain in his chest at the thought of that possibility. How could I have let her think that? Am I that incorrigible in my pathetic need to make someone believe I'm the kind of man I want to be?

But she'd known him for a year now. How deluded could she be? He was infinitely more open with her than he intended to.

But she doesn't know everything.

Does she have to?

She would want to.

She wouldn't stay another day if she did know.

Exactly.

He stopped walking, realizing he'd reached the shore. Can I just throw myself into the sea and die knowing the last thing I did was kiss a beautiful woman? That doesn't sound half bad.

Or he could just go back.

How could he face her now? He had no courage to tell her she was wrong about him. He had no idea what to do if he decided not to tell her.

He felt his head spinning again. He would have to force himself to be rational. He turned around and started walking again.

A decade ago, on a day like this, Antoinette taught Erik a lesson that had helped him several times in his life so far; the only catch was that he would usually forget it in the moments he needed it the most. But strangely, he remembered it now. At the time, he didn't realize why she wanted him to pretend to be something he was not; it was somewhat offensive to him. Only after several years did he realize she wasn't pretending. She thought he was a normal, untainted person. It was so unthinkable to Erik when they met, that she had to turn it into a game of pretending to have him believe it.

Lately, he had been doing the same with Alina to test how she'd react; he thought if he pretended he was normal and talked to her without fear and restraint that her reactions would betray her – that way he could see if she thought him a freak all along. Either Giry's game could predict her behavior, or she was only pretending until now. It was a risky move, but he had to know.

To his surprise, the more daring and open his actions became, the more she reacted to them – the more openly he showed her that he cared about her, the more she returned that behavior to him. The whole game became incredibly... addicting.

When and where did the game end? Sometime last night, as Erik was going blind frantically making stupid paper stars by candlelight, he realized he'd never in his life gone that far only to test a theory. He was doing this not to see if she would be happy with the gesture – he was doing it because he was hoping she would be delighted by the gesture, and because he wanted desperately to see her delighted.

Well. It certainly produced a result. It was as if something possessed him as soon as her lips touched him; he lost all will to pretend and play games and just acted on instinct, not even considering – forgetting, in fact, for a moment who she was and what he was. All he wanted was to get more of her.

Some of the delirious fog came back against his will, melting away some of the panics. This was breathtaking. I want nothing more than to be able to touch her every day of my life.

The possibility, however small or unlikely or unrealistic, that she might want the same was too much for him to resist.

He stopped, realizing he was in front of the house again, not remembering how or when exactly he got there. He walked over to the front door, but couldn't yet bring himself to come in.

Is it so bad if instead of confessing all my sins to her and watching her recoil in horror I try to start over and... Can I make myself into a normal man who isn't twisted to the bone, instead of just pretending I am? If she believes me to be, will that be enough for me to believe it too?

No, it isn't.

Shut up. Shut up. Shut up.

You're rationalizing your selfish lies.

No. No. No. I'm trying not to ruin a small piece of happiness God has decided to grant me.

Nobody granted it to you. You just stole it, and now you'll ruin it just the same.

I won't! It's not the same! She kissed me first! I'm not forcing –

The door opened, and Alina quickly stormed out dressed in her coat and hat, bumping into him with full force. They both stumbled, and Erik had to grab her arms to steady her.

"You're here!" She looked up at him, wide-eyed.

"I just went for a walk." he decided to hold her a tiny second longer, or until she shrugged him off.

"I was just going to look for you! I was worried!" She wasn't shrugging him off, it seemed.

"I'm sorry. There was no need for that." He looked at her, trying to see if she was attempting to shrug him off and he was missing it, but no, she wasn't.

"Stop running away all the time!" For a moment, Erik could see on her face a very familiar expression of insecurity. She was embarrassed. Was she really afraid he'd run away without a word after kissing her? It was a thought so wild it would be more fitting coming from him.

Seeing her filled him again with warm, soft fog; pushing panic away for now. He decided to try his luck a little more and bent his head, barely brushing his lips against her forehead. „I will."

She took his hand and led him back into the warmth.

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APPENDIX: Letters that arrived several days later.

Dear Erik,

I know it's easy to mistake me for a silly old woman, but rest assured I'm just as sharp as I was ten years ago. You can't hide things from me and even if you're lying to yourself I can still see the truth, clear as day. Alina seems to be equally stubborn and the whole situation is, truthfully, very amusing. You're both so bad at hiding you're in love with each other that you might even realize it on your own, but since I dislike taking any chances in life, I'm telling you now. I'm certain you love Alina, and from her letters, I'm certain she loves you just as much. By the time this reaches you, you might already know it. Don't you dare forget to tell me everything that happens?

I hope you will not let your head get the better of you in this; I'm aware you might be thinking you don't deserve anything good and knowing you, you'll probably have a very strong desire to ruin it all. While I can't do much from so far away, I'm writing to tell you as someone who knows everything about you – there is nothing you can think of that would make you unworthy of this. Please allow yourself to be happy. Alina will understand. Remember the pretend game we used to play? Allow yourself to believe it. It will all be well.

"Merry Christmas, dear Erik." I wish you luck with all my heart.

Love,

Antoinette.

Alina,

I don't care about your rambling; just tell me if you've kissed already. If you haven't by the time this reaches you I will personally come and smack you both over the head. Merry Christmas.

Love,

Amelija.

P.S. I'm betting Jelka's gloves you'll kiss him first.

Chapter 8:Loyalties

Alina woke up early the next day – it was Monday, and she had to go to work. The sound of her door opening woke Erik up instantly every time he even slept that long. She tried to be quiet, but Erik doubted she could be that quiet; he'll be damned if after thirty years anything catches him by surprise.

That's not true. Yesterday she did surprise me. What will our lives be like now? I've never been in a situation remotely close to this. I have nothing to go by. How am I supposed to act?

He had nothing to do today, he realized as he lay in bed looking at the ceiling. He'd handed in all he meant to do for the park and Jack had told him he'd handle the rest until the construction started after New Year's. Erik had no plans for what he'd do after and given the… everything that happened yesterday he didn't even think about it until now.

Since he was already awake, he decided he might as well get up and wish her a good morning. He got dressed and put on the mask quickly before going out. He still had no clue how to act.

Alina was by the stove already, making coffee. She turned when she saw him smiling.

"Come here. I can't move or this will explode."

He obediently walked up to her. "Good morning." He was unsure what to do – he wanted to hold her, but what if she changed her mind after yesterday? He wasn't too eager to find out. What if she just pushed him away? The possibility made him sick.

Alina leaned toward Erik, wrapping one arm around him while stirring with the other. "Good morning to you, too." The wide, genuine smile she gave him melted some of his insecurity.

Does that mean I can do whatever I want?

It meant something at least, he thought. He put his arm around her shoulders. "Classes today?"

I'm a proper Don Juan in my spare time, and I excel at talking to women.

"Yes. Thank God it's only one more week until I can lock the door for the holidays. You have no idea how impossible they get this time of year. They'd talk about anything other than the intended subject. Wait," she said, releasing him to pour coffee into two small cups. "I suppose you want some too? What are you doing today?"

"Nothing. I don't know. I might write."

"Write?" Alina took some bread and started slicing it.

"Write music. I haven't written anything down in a while. I have some ideas."

"Can I hear it later?" Alina, I smiled. She loved hearing him play.

"I doubt it." She looked at him, in surprise. "It's not violin music. It requires an orchestra, which I don't have."

"Oh. But if you did have an entire orchestra…" Alina raised her eyebrows in question.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves. I don't have one, as it is. I'll play the part I can." Erik shrugged as she sat down by the table, and he thought for a moment before deciding to sit across her, as he had always done before.

"When are you coming back?" he said before, he could stop himself. I am very good at keeping women wanting as well. Not clinging at all. Desmond would be proud.

"The school finishes around two, but I have something to discuss with the principal later. I don't know. I'll try not to take too long," she replied. "If you have no other plans, we could have dinner together when I come back."

"You're inviting me to have dinner with you? Isn't that a bit backward?" It was not as if he would refuse, but he would have liked to have a chance to invite her first.

It dawned on Erik he might have to be quicker around her, or one day she might ask him to marry her before he had the chance to do it himself. Not likely, freak. Don't forget.

She squinted at him, somewhat annoyed. "Sorry. I just wanted to ask you, it didn't occur to me we had to follow proper decorum. You've already noticed I'm not very ladylike."

"I don't mind that. You just have to let me do something first, for a change." It made him feel a lot less uneasy, knowing that she had no idea what she was doing either. Not to mention it was incredibly amusing to watch her blush when he pointed it out.

"Fine," she sighed. "Sorry."

"But I accept it. I'll wait for you." I hate waiting,"

They spent the rest of the morning eating breakfast in relaxed silence. Alina put her hair into a bun, shoved her papers into a bag, and wrapped a scarf around her face and neck while Erik sat and stared outside, lost in thought.

"Good luck with writing!" It jerked him back, into reality. Alina was already standing by the door, holding her bag with a sparkle in her eyes, ready to go out. She's so lovely, Erik thought for the thousandth time he'd seen her standing by the door in the morning, wishing him a good day as she would leave. Every time it happened, he wished he could just go up to her and –

He could do that. He got up and walked to her, stopping right in front of her and lowering her scarf just a little bit from her face. He learned to leave a light kiss right at the corner of her mouth, holding her cheek with his hand.

"Have a nice day."

She smiled and turned around, leaving with a little more skip in her step than usual.

ooo

The house was incredibly silent after Alina left. Erik usually enjoyed the peace, but today it was… awkward. Misplaced. He needed to distract himself. He pulled out his violin and started playing, but gave up after a short while because he couldn't focus. He couldn't draw, either. He didn't even try reading. For lack of other ideas, he just started cleaning – first, he tidied up all of his papers, then he folded all of his shirts, then he tided some more again, washed the dishes – thank God I insisted we get decent plumbing as soon as possible, he thought to himself for the hundredth time – dusted every single horizontal surface he could find, and in the end, to feel a little less emasculated, he headed outside to chop some firewood. The repetitive movements and sounds of splicing logs calmed him down. He kept thinking about yesterday's events the entire time. He had thought having something this beautiful happen would make him more inspired, but today it was just making him anxious. This was such a strange situation that nothing felt real. He'd have to get used to it before he could do anything else in his life, he thought.

Oh, but will I ever get used to it? He stopped every so often in the middle of his work, stuck in a daydream – remembering Alina's tender fingers, her soft skin, and sweet smile. He shook his head, hoping she wouldn't come home to see him standing still and smiling to himself as a fool.

Yana interrupted him in the middle of woodcutting and daydreaming.

"Erik?"

Erik jumped a little, thankful that she couldn't guess what he was thinking. Yana was the only person he had ever met who was quiet enough to regularly sneak up on him, particularly when he was distracted like this.

"Hello", he turned around.

"You're home alone this week, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Could you stay with Pjotr, then? If you're not busy", she hurried, "I have some more shifts, in the kitchen instead of Eliza. She's sick. It will be a great chance for me. And Pjotr misses you."

"Of course. Anytime." Erik had to admit he missed Pjotr, as well.

"No need for any time," she waved her hands. "I'll be home at two. If you need to go somewhere, you can leave him with Svetlana."

Erik knew Svetlana; she lived nearby and spent a lot of time with Yana. She knew him too and did her best to avoid him. Annoying little woman.

I'll endure it.

"Alright. Just tell her about it. I don't want her to make a scene if I show up on her doorstep."

Yana grinned. "No scene. She won't dare."

"Is tomorrow alright? I have something to do today, and…" Erik trailed off. He had nothing to do until Alina came home, but he was too absent-minded to trust himself with a child, particularly one as full of energy as Pjotr.

"And someone to meet," Yana said. "How are you?"

"Why? I'm fine." Why, wouldn't I be? What do you know?

She shrugged. "Good."

"Why?" Erik, I insisted.

"Because you're in love, and I think you're not taking it well," she laughed.

"How am I supposed to be taking it?"

"I don't know. Men never take it well. It's always something serious," Yana replied. "But you're my friend, so I have to ask."

"Well, I am fine." I am not fine,"

She gave him a look he couldn't decipher. "I'm happy you listened to me."

"I didn't. She kissed me first." Yana was easy to talk to, Erik realized long ago. He didn't mind confiding in her; she seemed so far removed from the real world – like a fairy of some sort – that telling her almost anything felt safe. Like whispering your secrets to the stars, without fear of judgment or scrutiny.

"Oh, I knew she would. I didn't mean that. I just wanted you to let her," she said, pale fairy eyes flickering at him mischievously.

Alina was late. Two o'clock came and went, and she should have been back already. Erik waited, trying to be patient, but he couldn't focus on anything. Why isn't she home? It normally took twenty minutes from the school to their house; Alina could cross the distance in fifteen. Three o'clock passed. It was half past four now, and Erik was mad with worry. Where would she be?

Did she run away?

That was not probable. All of her things were still here. If she wanted to leave she could have just said so; she knew he couldn't go after her or stop her. It was likely she got delayed at school. Maybe she had a lot of work to do. She'd been late before, and Erik normally didn't ask her anything since he normally had a lot of work to do himself.

Did something happen?

Also not probable. It was the middle of the day and she was capable of taking care of herself.

Why is she not home, then?

There was no point in thinking about it anymore. She'll be back.

What else could I possibly think about? What if she needs me?

Well then, I should just go look for her and stop this nonsense. Erik hated going out in crowded places, he hated going out during the day, but he'd live. He'd bundle himself up until no one could see a single inch of his skin and he could walk around a bit, just to be sure. He didn't have to get too close to school, or anybody. If he couldn't find her, he could just go to Jack.

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The freezing air cleared his mind somewhat, and it seemed as if he'd been somewhat irrational. Alina was probably fine. He was letting his paranoia get the better of him – although, now that he was out already, he might as well commit to it. He could always say he just wanted to walk home with her. Wouldn't that be creepy? No, if a normal man did that, it would be romantic. Let's go with that.

As he approached the school, Erik realized he'd made a mistake. What was he thinking? There were so many people, mostly children, around that he'd much rather sink into shadows than stay there a minute longer. He was not going inside and didn't want to get too close either, so he decided to just pick a secluded place to wait for her. The crowd of people leaving the building and walking around the street made him nervous. Where are you? Why can't I find you?

Suddenly, a female voice from somewhere ahead of him yelled, "This shouldn't be up to debate! This is a school for children, not for adults to look good!"

This was easier than I expected.

He moved closer to the voice, feeling less uneasy now that he had a direction and someone familiar at the end of the way. He spotted them in front of the school – he had to avoid a horde of children going the other way; luckily, the classes had ended so the crowd soon cleared a bit. Alina was talking loudly, waving her hands around, and seemingly furious. Next to her was Jack, and another man was just leaving back inside, looking equally frustrated. Erik walked up to them to listen quietly. He didn't know

what Alina had to talk to the principal about, but he had a feeling he was about to find out.

"I'm asking you to just be pragmatic for once –" Jack started, trying to sound calm.

"Pragmatic? Pragmatic? You think it's pragmatic to kick a child out of school because we can't be bothered to deal with him?" Alina was decidedly not trying to sound calm,"

"We bothered to deal with him, and it didn't work! He's a disruption to everyone else, and other children are suffering!"

She fumed for a moment before continuing. "That's not going to work on me! I'm not casting a child away like that! Either the school is for everyone, or it's a mockery of its purpose!"

Jack threw his arms in the air exasperatedly, turning to Erik. "Has your darling always been this stubborn?"

"Yes, she's a nightmare sometimes," he replied. Jack grinned at him. Alina barely registered what he'd said, but she automatically started yelling at both of them.

"You're supposed to be on my side!"

"I am not supposed to do anything," Why am I involved in this?"

"Because it's the right thing to do!" She said, wide-eyed. Erik saw Jack in the corner of his eye, taking an annoying breath to interrupt her, and sensed a disaster just a moment before it happened.

"You're being impertinent, and unreasonable-"

"This school is his only chance, to"

Erik could not stand people yelling in his vicinity for very long. He had to close his eyes, take a deep breath, and rub his temples before he might say

or do something he'd regret just to make them stop. Alina took the cue and shut up immediately, Jack followed.

"One by one, if you must," he said slowly.

"Alright," said Jack, taking the chance while Alina was gathering her thoughts, "They have a problematic boy in school and the principal wants to expel him. His grades are horrendous and he's a nuisance to other kids. Alina, on the other hand, is insisting to keep him. Insisting rather aggressively, might I add, and now I have to talk to one very upset school principal."

"Alright? Why?" he turned to her.

She'd had enough time to calm down, thank God, and she continued quietly, "The boy is severely abused at home. I'm afraid of what will happen to him if he stops coming to school."

Oh.

Jack chimed in again. "Yes, there's a suspicion that he's abused, but he's now abusing other kids and we'd all prefer to get their parents off our backs."

Alina puffed, irritated. "Suspicion? Have you ever fallen stairs and woken up with a bruise in the shape of a handprint around your neck? Or tried to light a furnace and ended up with burns that happen to look exactly like cigarette burns on your forearms?"

No, but he had often in his life told stupid lies to cover the real cause of his injuries; but that, he thought, wasn't important right now. "What do you normally do in these situations?" Erik asked, now curious.

"Nothing!" Alina shouted, on the verge of tears, "Nobody cares about kids like him! We can call the police, but they can't do much. If he keeps acting out there's nothing we can do, because no one will want to deal with him! They sometimes send kids like him to special schools and juvenile homes, but he hasn't committed an actual crime and his parents don't care enough to

get him help! It's all a circle, of people pushing him away and him feeling abandoned and acting out to get noticed!"

"What would you do, then?"

"I don't know yet." She wiped a tear from her cheek, before continuing. "But I'll think of something, and it's worth trying. We can't kick him out. He keeps coming every day; he never misses a single class. He argues and fights and gets in trouble, and he fails at everything, but he still comes."

"Maybe he has to", Jack chimed in. "Maybe, that's why he's so angry all the time. His parents make him come even though he can't handle the schoolwork?"

"No, I don't think so", she shook her head. "If they did, they'd make the effort to follow his progress. They've never so much as signed a single thing, let alone showed up in school. No, they seem more like the type that would prefer to send him off to work somewhere. Besides, he is competent enough to handle it, it's obvious." She turned, to Jack. "Listen, I need to try and help this child. If you can buy me some more time, I'll be eternally grateful. I promise I'll think of something. It doesn't hurt to try. Just tell them to postpone it. Please!"

Jack looked at her, then at Erik, then at her again. "You still have all the other children to deal with. Wouldn't you rather focus on other things?"

"Please, Jack. I'll try, and if it doesn't work, they can do whatever they want."

"It might turn out well," Erik offered. Everything about this was telling him it was a small chance it would turn out well, but he couldn't help but feel bad about the child. And for Alina, fighting a futile and most likely thankless battle for some outcast kid she barely knew. Antoinette, is this how you felt? I'm sorry. It looks like trying to push back an avalanche with a rake.

Jack sighed. "I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you! Thank you!" she nearly jumped in excitement, but stopped herself when she remembered she was in her workplace. "Thank you, Jack! We'll think of something, you'll see!"

"Don't thank me yet. You put this job on your shoulders." He shrugged," "Now, I've had enough of talking about work. Don't you two have somewhere to be? Your knight came to your castle to pick you up. Show some gratitude."

Alina turned to Erik in shock. "Right. Weren't you supposed to be home today?"

"I was. You were late."

"Sorry. I was busy. Principal Dowling is a hard person to talk to."

"Frankly," Jack chimed in again, "He's usually not, it's just that you're so incredibly, annoyingly arrogant with him."

"I am not! I just told him what I think!"

"Exactly. While I find it charming that you pay no mind to the status and power of people around you, you'll have to be a bit more careful, as a twenty-five-year-old teacher talking to a forty-year-old man who happens to be your boss at the moment," Jack crossed his arms, looking at her sternly.

"I've been successful so far," she looked away, embarrassed.

"Oh. You're a very successful manipulator until you get too angry, at which point you just throw all the reason out the window and ramble furiously about what is right and why people have to do something. Nobody has to do anything. You have to convince them they want to."

"Fine," she said quietly.

"Hey, if you can do it with kids, you can do it with adults too. They're the same, they just have longer arms," Jack said.

She chuckled. "Alright."

"Can we please go now?" Erik asked. This place was still loud and crowded and annoying.

"Go ahead," said Jack, "I'll go off to control your damage." He pointed his finger at Alina,"

"Sorry, Jack."

"I'll live," he grinned sharply. "You're like a dynamite explosion, Alina. You're the most effective person I've ever seen at what you do, but I do wish you had fewer collaterals. And you're expensive." He waved his hand at them both, before heading back inside the school. Erik put a hand to his mouth, trying not to laugh.

"What's so funny?" She asked him,"

"That's a very accurate description." he straightened himself.

"Oh, is it? And which instrument of destruction would you compare yourself to?"

"Cyanide", Erik replied without missing a beat, smiling proudly. It's something he'd thought about.

"Why?"

"Because I'm toxic to people who try to contain me, and nobody notices me until it's too late."

"Yes. You're also very bitter, so that works," she narrowed her eyes at him.

Touché.

"Let's go home," she sighed. "Let's just have something to eat, and relax. I had a long day."

They walked home in silence through the freshly fallen snow. Alina looked like someone walked over her; the skip in her step from this morning was

replaced with a furrowed brow and slouching shoulders. She didn't even comment on the beautiful scene.

I should do something to comfort her.

They entered the house and she shrugged off her coat, sinking into the armchair and covering her face with her hands.

I really should think of something comforting her. He had no idea what, but he had to try, at least; he made some tea and sandwiches while she sulked, and brought them to her, pulling up a chair to sit next to her.

"What's wrong?" Erik tried his best to sound sympathetic.

"I'm a disaster, and I have no idea how to solve this situation," she said.

"You're not a disaster", he started slowly, trying to find the right words. "This didn't go as you planned, but it's nothing disastrous."

"The only reason they're putting up with me there is because they're afraid of Jack," Alina said, waving her hands around and swallowing back tears. It always perplexed Erik when she got into conflicts with such fury and conviction and collapsed in self-doubt as soon as they were over. He wondered what made her this way. At least she's not silently hiding her face anymore.

"I don't think so. You've been there since the beginning. I think they're keeping you because you're very good at what you do, and you care about children. You're fighting because you care about this boy, even though clearly nobody else is bothered."He took a moment to think. "Even if you don't think of anything else to do with him, knowing that you fought for him will certainly make an impact on him. Trust me."

"I don't think they care about that. They want him to stop bothering others."

"But you care about that, don't you?" He looked straight at her," "You've been stupidly idealistic and irrationally loyal to people since I've met you,

and now you've offered to sacrifice your time and energy for some child you barely know. You do care about helping, even a little bit."

"I do", she looked at him angrily, "and it's not stupid!"

"Yes, it is. But it's admirable." I'd rather look at my hands. "It's because of that stupidity that I'm alive. You're something rare and incredible, and you can change people's lives. Jack might be right that you need to adapt to the world around you to get better results, but I think that the same thing that gets you in trouble is what I admire the most about you. You truly do believe what you say. And it might be what changes people's minds in the end. It's what changed my mind when I met you."

Is it possible that I've made Alina speechless? She stared at him, somewhat shaken.

"That is the loveliest thing you could have said to me."

"I meant it", Erik shrugged.

Alina took her cup and took a sip, still looking at him intently. "Thank you."

"Alright."

"You've grown to be just as crucial as a pillar of support in my life as you claim I am in yours," she admitted quietly. "I feel better. I'll do my best in this mess."

Really? Erik couldn't remember if anyone had ever depended on him willingly in such a way. It was frightening, but at the same time he felt… needed it. He didn't know what to say.

They sat in silence for a while, drinking tea. The distance between them was too big for Erik's taste, and he wanted to reach out to her but had no idea how. Was this an inappropriate time?

"Can I kiss you now?" he said, regretting it as soon as it left his mouth.

She looked at him in confusion. "Of course, you can. You can kiss me anytime, you don't have to ask."

"Pardon. I wasn't sure if the moment was right. I'm not, uh, experienced with... Social situations." That didn't help," He needed to stop rambling. "And I won't do it if you decide you don't want it."

Alina was openly outraged now. "If I just suddenly change my mind? It doesn't work that way - listen, just kiss me already!"

That was explicit enough for him.

Setting aside his cup, Erik lowered himself off the chair until he was kneeling on the floor before her. She fumbled a little; Erik realized this was probably not the usual thing to do, but he didn't care. He took her hand and lightly nudged her toward him, stopping her just as she got to the edge of the armchair, cupping her face with his free hand as he reached to kiss her.

Erik's head emptied once again and only warmth remained. Softness and warmth were sensations he'd grown resigned to living without, never expecting he'd one day experience an abundance of both. They would kick him out of his orbit every time; he was not sure if he could ever get used to this.

He decided to pull away before he got a little too warm.

Alina remained close to his face; looking at Erik the way no one had ever looked at him before. She ran her thumb along his jaw, and he flinched as she brushed against the edge of the mask.

"What did I do?"

"Nothing, just," he shrugged, embarrassed. "Don't take it off."

"I'm careful," she said. "Trust me. I won't do that if you don't want me to."

Erik nodded, relaxing a little. Her fingers started tracing all over his face, then ran through his hair only to go back and stroke his cheeks lightly. He could barely feel it through the leather, but he didn't care.

"But if you did want me to, I'd gladly do it", she said, looking straight into his eyes.

That may even be true, but it's not something I want to think about right now. I'd rather enjoy this moment as it is, in its unbelievably beautiful simplicity.

Erik decided he'd already thrown all pretense of dignity out the window, so he might as well do as he pleased; he lowered his head to rest on her lap. She didn't seem to mind, as her fingers continued running along his face and gently stroking his hair. His heartbeat slowly returned to normal.

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Jack entered the school furiously, going straight to the principal's office.

Alina, God damn her. She knew better than this; he would never have bothered associating himself with someone stupid and she was not stupid. It was partially his fault for letting her continue for too long. If you let people talk long enough, they'll bury themselves every time. It was a fact Alina knew as well, but alas, she forgot it too often. Young people. Always so eager to be heard.

He went upstairs, carefully collecting his thoughts. He noticed the school was in a much better state than when he first picked out this building; it was built on sturdy foundations and now that they've replaced all the old walls and put in new windows it was a perfectly fine establishment, on par with public schools in New York. Even if it was a bit ugly. It had that grey, depressing factory look poor schools had; where everything is in more or less working condition, but nothing is particularly new or pretty. The bare essentials are there, but everybody is too overworked and overstressed to bother with details and embellishments. Jack knew the look well. He went to one of those schools himself.

What is better for this school? That was a good question. What is better for us? That was an even better question, and Jack didn't have an answer to either of those. Alina would blindly insist on getting her way because she saw a kid in trouble and suddenly nothing else mattered. She was normally

very calculated and composed and paired with her fearless efficiency, it was a winning combination; this sudden switch to irrationality that turned whenever something tickled her sympathy was the only thing that prevented her from ever being a truly remarkable business associate.

Although it seemed to be the very thing that led her to him, so there was that. It also seemed to have something to do with the fact her mysterious knight kept himself under control; Jack had seen that kind of seething, barely-concealed instability before and was honestly quite impressed by how well it was being repressed. And he has been incredibly useful; a real goldmine. Erik was the source of ideas that Jack turned into money, and Alina kept him on the right side of the thin line between genius and insanity. It would be wise not to let her down or this whole house of cards might crumple. Was it wise to work with them, then? They seemed unstable and immature, and he wanted nothing more than stability and some goddamn peace while he made a nice living for himself. Ideals were nice and all; he'd had plenty of them and engaging hers has been refreshing so far. But not if it kept interfering with his plans.

On the other hand, Jack had to admit begrudgingly, that they're so incredibly amusing. Maybe even endearing. And I can always find someone else if they turn out to be useless.

He knocked on Dowling's door.

"I'm busy", a familiar voice replied through the wood.

"Good", he smiled his best smile as he entered. "No one will bother us, then."

Stan looked up from his papers to stare at Jack. "Franklin. Your little protégée is giving me a headache. Please go away." I'm so incredibly glad she's not here to get pissed at being called a little protégée, Jack thought. Stanley was a somewhat nervous man – small, round glasses, tidy mustache, neatly pressed suit. He was short but athletic; he always kept himself disciplined in all things. Always secretly afraid of the unknown and unpredictable, hidden behind a neat, composed mask. No wonder she was giving him a headache; she'd give him kidney stones soon enough.

Now that Alina was not around, Jack had some time to notice his surroundings. The room was a small, but airy space with only a desk, chair, and large bookshelf on the wall. Everything was neat; there was a glass of water on the table - at a reasonable distance from any piece of paper. Jack would bet his own eyes that the books on the shelf are organized alphabetically.

He remembered Stan from when they were young. Always so eager to keep things in check. A bit of a prick, really – rigid and humorless – but ultimately couldn't stay mad at people for too long. Jack hoped this spinelessness would turn out to be a stable trait in Stan's adulthood.

"Ah, isn't she? Imagine only the headaches I got." Jack, you winked. "I'm here to solve our problem, Stanley." He sat comfortably on the empty chair across from Stan before he had a chance to stop him. "From what I've gathered, she's rather wilful lately. Is Tilyou the one keeping her here?"

Stan sighed. "Yes. I wonder what she did to get this far. And now she has all these ideas about how I should run my school. Insufferable. I never thought I'd say this, but maybe we should have kept women at home."

"Ah, I might agree. Sadly, I can only imagine what she did to get here; good old George either keeps his honey secret, or she has something other on him. I bet she isn't even that good; you can always recognize the ones that climb through special means. Always more attitude than work," Jack waved his hand in pretending frustration.

Stan looked at him suspiciously. He may have been too obvious. "Franklin, she's rather remarkable on the outside. I thought you knew this. Her children are successful and well-behaved for the most part. We don't have trouble with her classes."

"Not surprising. I bet George arranged for her to get the best classes."

Stan sighed. "He did."

"How does she even have a say in this matter, then? She wouldn't even know this kid, much less have worked with him. What kind of connections

did she pull?" Jack feigned his annoyance with the kind of passion he rarely showed with genuine emotions. He could guess the answer, but he'd much rather hear it aloud.

Stan suddenly narrowed his eyes. "George did put her in the best classes, and I heard he was pressed by someone unknown. That was before. We put her with small kids until she gets the necessary qualifications to be an official teacher, but she's been infiltrating other classes. She offered to take children that other teachers kept sending outside, and made a special class for them. She stays after school thrice a week and gives them additional lessons to help them keep up, or take them outside. Why the kids agree to that, I have no idea. None of them was eager to come to school before, and now they're here all the time. Including this little bastard."

"Oh, goddamn", Jack put his hand to his mouth in an impressive display of annoyance, concealing his smile. "And now you have to deal with them all? What a mess."

"Frankly", Stan finally admitted, "we do, but it's much quieter lately."

"Ah, but what kind of discipline is that? If a child won't behave, they need to be taught a lesson. Going to school is a privilege, not a right. What kind of message are you sending?"

Stan got up and walked around. "That's what I've been saying, but guess what? I've been talking to some people around New York. They're planning to introduce mandatory schooling until age 14 within the next few years, and it means we can't kick those little insolent brats out! We'll have to put up with them soon enough or we'll face both public and legal consequences!"

Jack was convincingly appalled. "So you're saying the law is changing, and she's the only one you currently have in here who knows how to handle those kids?"

"Yes! She's costing me a fortune, what with all the projects and nonsense she pulls, but it seems that we need her to keep the others in check! She's the best we have when it comes to difficult and problematic kids! Frankly, if

she left, I'm not surprised if other benefactors objected and not just Tilyou because we'd have a lot more delinquency around!" Stan paused in the middle of his pacing, realizing what he'd just said.

"So you have to keep Boricevic in this school unless you want to unleash a whole lot of mess in a couple of years? Honestly, Stan, I don't envy you. I remember how you always hated mess and disobedience. This position is perfect for you; it keeps you at a healthy distance from it." Jack, cracked his knuckles. Not to mention how useless and disposable Stan would be in a situation that he couldn't keep in control, but he felt like saying that out loud wasn't necessary. If Alina had a lick of sense, she would let the chaos unfold on its own without getting on anyone's nerves and then climb the ladder after her bosses proved to be incompetent. It's a shame that she'd never think of that herself. "So what of this kid, Walter Preston? He doesn't sound like an immigrant."

"No, he's from here. His parents are born American. They're just poor enough to live in a slum with the rest."

"A white kid, then?"

"Yes. Why?" Stan frowned with suspicion.

"I reckon that goes to his advantage, in the eyes of the public." Jack, I smiled.

"What are you saying, Franklin?" Stan was caught on, but he was still years behind him.

"I don't know. It just seemed to me that he would instill some sympathy and sorrow into the bleeding hearts of dear old ladies who read the newspaper if he was suddenly cast out, so miserable and problematic and misunderstood. Healthy American boy, not good enough for a school that puts up with those dirty immigrants." Jack studied his hand carefully, fearing he might burst into laughter if he looked at Stan's face. "It seems that our wilful little miss is on your side. The side of… peace, so to speak."

If you let people talk long enough, they'll bury themselves every time, Jack thought, heading home to have a nice hearty dinner. Thank you, Stan. I wasn't sure if I wanted to keep doing this, but you've helped me make up my mind.

Goddamned Walter Preston better be a saint after Alina is finished with him.

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Antoinette,

I received your last letter. Thank you, but there was no need for that in the end. We managed to settle it amongst ourselves. I would have preferred to hear more about your life as well; I hope you're doing fine. Please write if you need anything. I read in the newspaper that the Opera is completely restored – are you back at work? I hope nobody blamed you for anything. As far as I can remember, I've destroyed any evidence of us being connected, aside from witnesses. If you wish, I could come back to destroy the witnesses as well.

I'm sorry for causing you all that trouble.

I took Alina to see Central Park because Jack told me it would be "irresistibly romantic" and since I'm not a particularly desirable suitor I thought I might at least try to be charming. We went in the evening when there weren't so many people around; it's so cold here that almost nobody notices me outside. I like winter – it shifts people's priorities to minding their own business.

For the record, Central Park is enormous and it looks exquisite at night, especially when it's buried in fresh snow and dimly lit by streetlamps. I'm enclosing a picture. Alina also looks exquisite when she's smiling in the light of street lamps. I had a nice time.

What I didn't expect was that Croatian people are everywhere; as we walked through the streets of Lower Manhattan Alina told me that there is a whole society of Croatian people in America. She has recently been writing letters to them for advice on getting her citizenship and all the other benefits

people get when they're proper members of society. I can't imagine a country the size of a needle being such a strong immigrant current, but here they are. Knowing probability laws, it's almost impossible that we'd run into any of them in a city this big. And yet, Alina managed to find a charcoal scribble on one of the skyscrapers – yes, they have skyscrapers in the city like in the picture, it's a bit unnerving, nothing should be that tall – that she says was written in Serbo-Croatian. Probably Croatian, since Serbs wrote in Cyrillic. It said something like this:

"OVDE NE UMEJU NI DA PIJU, A KAMOLI DA PEVAJU."

I have no clue what it means – maybe you know - but she laughed when she saw it, then for the whole evening and the next day. She still laughs if I try to ask her about it.

Take care.

Erik.

Chapter 9:Lessons

"What would make a child act so bizarrely?" Alina mused as she made dinner. Erik had hoped she would let him help, but she insisted to make it herself since he had cleaned the entire house. He settled down by the table to write a little since the ticks and buzzes in his mind seemed to settle a little bit now that she was back.

"I don't know."

"Just say anything, that comes to mind."

"Children are not rational," he said. "I can't understand them most of the time – but, it seems to me as though he comes to school to avoid being at home."

"Obviously, yes. But why would he come to school? He only gets scolded here, even if nobody abuses him. He could just skip and enjoy some peace."

It was very obvious to him why. "Being scolded is better than being forgotten."

She turned him in though. "I suspected so. But you see, my colleagues seem to think children are naturally stupid and bad, and we need to exorcize the devil out of them to raise them right and make them functioning members of society. So if we fail, it's not us, it's them." She cut carrots and potatoes into small cubes, and Erik wondered suddenly when he'd become so comfortable with somebody waving a knife in his presence. "I don't agree. Almost all the children I've met wanted to be good. They want freedom, and they like to test us, but they crave our attention and praise more than anything. And if we give it to them, they suddenly find it very hard to

disappoint us. This boy is a walking testimony that children reach out to adults even when they don't get much from them."

"Maybe."

"The argument itself, on a purely logical level, seems stupid to me", she continued. "If the Church says we were made in God's image, why would it also say that children are broken and need to be fixed? Would you make something broken, just to see if it would fix itself? Either God is bad, or people are born good. Everything else is just manipulation of the masses."

"What a daring statement," Erik said lazily, occupied by his own business. "The good people would be scandalized."

"So don't tell them," she said, with an obvious hint of laughter in her voice.

"Which one is it, then?" He lifted his gaze from his work, curious. "I was quite clearly born broken and had to be fixed along the way. Maybe God is malevolent, or everything is created randomly? Maybe there is no God."

She looked back at him in shock. He had no idea blasphemy would upset her this much. "Alright, sorry. That was in poor taste," Erik lifted his hands in a peaceful gesture. "You can go on believing in a benevolent God. We'll say I was just an aberration."

She blinked. "But you're not broken."

"I do seem to be patching up nicely," he chuckled.

"You're not broken! There is nothing inherently bad about you!" Alina felt a sort of desperation she sometimes felt around him when she was trying to prove something obvious to a person who had very different basic ideas of obvious.

"Don't play dumb, please," Erik said. "Ideas are one thing, but blindly insisting on something untrue just hurts your credibility."

She blinked again. "If there was something inherently bad about you, wouldn't you be bad for people even when they're good to you?"

"I suppose."

"You're kind to me", she said, "and to Yana, Piotr, and even Jack. And you very obviously love teta Giry, who also thinks you're a decent human being."

"As I said, I was patched up along the way. Giry's doing. I'd say she beat the devil out of me, but it's more as if she coaxed it out with cookies and milk. Remarkable woman."

She stared at him in disbelief, shook her head, and kept cutting. "It's a futile discussion. I don't think you're the child of the devil, either way. Nobody is. It's a ridiculous notion."

She was turned away from him now, and for a brief second, he was thankful for it.

"Alina?" he called out, quietly.

"Hm?"

"Even if I'm not a decent human being or any kind of human being, it's worth trying to be when I'm around you."

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"Miss Boricevic," principal Dowling came to Alina early on Tuesday, "I need to speak to you."

"Yes, sir?" she stood up to greet him, anxious. Jack had told her everything would be fine, but she didn't know about his idea of fine.

"It has been brought to my attention that the Preston boy can be persuaded to show respect if you are given some time with him. I trust that you won't disappoint me in this, as you have so adamantly insisted on keeping him here," he said coldly. Alina never did understand this stuck-up fellow, or why he even wanted to work in a school. He seemed unable to understand that children were not just smaller versions of adults, and was often frustrated at them; still, he was good at providing structure and rules, and he

seemed to realize how important education was (even if his idea of who should get one was not entirely aligned with hers).

"Thank you, sir. I'll see him today after school, and then again several times a week. I'll try to make a plan for him, and if he fails to show any kind of progress then you may do with him as you please", Alina said, realizing a moment too late what she had said – Dowling could already do as he pleased, or so he thought, and it would be wiser if she didn't talk to him like he was on her level. "Sir. With respect. "Thank you", she just tried to save you.

"Alright, miss Boricevic," he said, "I trust that you know what you're doing. I'll leave you to it, then."

"Thank you, sir," Alina nodded as he left.

Finally, she could grade the homework in peace. She sat down at her desk to get started. She was looking forward to it, because she had told kids to write as they pleased, about anything they wished, and she wanted to see what they'd come up with.

Alina liked giving the kids creative tasks to do if only to see how they would respond when she presented no clear right and wrong answers. It confused them somewhat, but she wasn't going to fail anyone on an assignment like this, so they were slowly coming out of their shells.

Girls were harder to coax out of their shells than boys. They were, for the most part, very good at determining what adults expected of them, and what they had to do to be considered "good kids". Once Alina put them in a situation like this, they would continue making stuff they thought she wanted to read, instead of the stuff they wanted to write. For a while, at least. Maybe they could be convinced. Some of these girls are quite talented. Alina moved quickly through the papers until there was only one left to grade.

She stared at Walt's homework, trying to hold back laughter.

The assignment was to compose a poem, and good God, compose what he did. The handwriting was horrendous, the spelling as well. Walter did his homework so rarely that she was honestly surprised when he handed it in. She was certain that he knew how to read and write, but he seemed to be on such a low level that it may as well have been written by a seven-year-old. Not a particularly talented seven-year-old. Was this the same kid? He had a great vocabulary, and a quick sharp tongue that got him in trouble all the time; not to mention he was surprisingly good at math.

An idea formed in the back of Alina's head as she tried to decipher this messy, blotchy pile of nonsense.

Not to mention that the language was decidedly not appropriate for any kind of school context; if anyone but her saw this, he'd be kicked out so hard he might end up in California. Other than that, the poem was hilarious – it was about Sunday school, and while blasphemous and rude, Alina couldn't stop laughing at his choice of words and poetic figures; the comparisons and wordplays were – well, it was beautiful, and it was disgusting. Alina wished she could keep it to herself and frame it on her wall. At the same time, she wished to never subject anyone with a weak heart to this kind of nonsense. Her colleagues thought disobedience was akin to a sin; Alina couldn't help but feel, ever since she had started working with children that it was simply a display of character. She liked children who showed her they had their mind – within reasonable means, that is.

Twain would be proud of this little brat.

Alina graded Walter's paper with the only grade she thought fitting, snickering to herself. Right on time, too, because the classes were about to start. Kids poured in and took their seats, chattering and squeaking with their chairs.

The little twat stared at her with such a smug expression while she was handing back graded homework that she almost started laughing again. Goddamn, kids. When you're twelve years old, it's easy to think you're the most controversial thing to ever walk this Earth.

Isn't that somewhat unfair to me? I know someone who's near thirty and still thinks he's the most controversial thing to ever walk this Earth.

"Here you go, Walt. Highest grade."

At least it shook him up a little bit when he saw it. He stared up at her.

"Congratulations. It's some good-quality poetry, although it took me a while to decipher your handwriting. Have you been reading Voltaire for inspiration?"

Walt narrowed his eyes to the teacher.

"I'll have to take it back for now," Alina continued, "since I can't have you showing it around, but your grade still stands. Please see me after class and you can have it back. Principal Dowling wishes me to discuss something else with you as well."

He nodded, to her surprise. Walter didn't just agree on things, usually.

Alina spent the rest of the classes trying to appear normal, anticipating her meeting with Walt with more anxiety than she felt before meeting Dowling. She'd say Walt felt the same, as he was unusually quiet for the rest of the day.

Once the bell rang for the last time, all the students scurried out in the same cloud of noise and fury; that is, all except for one. Walt sat stubbornly in his seat, looking at Alina. Alina sat stubbornly in her seat, looking back at him.

Alina realized she was acting stupid. This was not a battle she had to win. It was just a kid who needed help. Maybe a friend for a change, not an enemy. She was the adult here, so she should be the one to take the step.

"How are you, Walt?" she said, smiling slightly.

He raised his eyebrows at her.

"I did like your poem, I have to say. It was very clever. Where did you get the idea for it?"

"I hate going to church."

"Yes, you explained that rather eloquently already."

He smiled back. "I thought it would be fun. And I wanted to see Teacher Barnwell's face."

Oh, right. He used to be in Emily Barnwell's class before he was transferred to Alina - well before he made her cry and she had to jump in and take him to her own. Poor, dear Emily. She looks like the kind of person who loves going to Sunday school.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you. I suppose your high grade will make up for the scandal I've so cruelly denied you."

"I don't care about grades."

Alina bowed her head to the side. There is, in fact, a small percentage of kids who truly don't care, but I'll eat my quill if this kid is one of them. "Very well. If it's the exposure you want, I can arrange to have your poems – poems, if you have more - published. On a small scale, of course, but it will certainly gather attention. Maybe the last page of the local newspaper. With the fun." She was only half joking," Walt would be popular in some of the satirical papers, she thought.

Well, that shook him. "You're trying to expel me? That's what the principal wants, isn't it? If he finds out, he'll kick me out. You could have just failed me, it's not such a big deal, but you want to get rid of me - you know what, do it! I don't care! You can't control me!"

What? "What? No. No, no. Why the h - what gave you that idea? I just had a very long talk with Mr. Dowling about how you shouldn't be expelled-" I need to stop before I say too much in front of this kid – "I don't want you out of the school. I volunteered to give you some private lessons after class to help you catch up with the other kids because I think you have potential. I want you to start doing things I know you're capable of doing. I know you're a smart kid, and I want you to start believing it too."

He scoffed. "Why would I? In a few years, my old man will pull me out of here anyway if he decides we need the money. You think all this fancy poetry will help me with a coal mine?"

Well, that was a fair point. "Alright. But if you prove yourself and enough prominent people notice you, you might end up getting a scholarship. Isn't that worth a try?"

Alina felt strange mentioning this to a kid who was so far failing almost all classes. Did she have proof that he was gifted, or was it just a hunch? Or perhaps wishful thinking?

"Like hell!" Walter, you almost yelled. Something must have upset him because he didn't even notice he started cursing. "Are you making fun of me? Do I look like one of those posh momma's boys with scholarships and little bodies? I'll be lucky if I'm ever able to read my name on the first try! I can't write without a headache, because the letters keep switching and jumbling up!"

A puzzle fell into place on Alina's head, almost audibly.

"Can you repeat that?" she leaned forward, looking at him. Walt felt terrified; he had only seen her staring at him so intently when he'd done something wrong. He said more than he intended and more than he should.

"I apologize, for-"

"I don't care about etiquette right now. Is it true?"

"What?"

"Letters change in front of your eyes? That's why you never want to read and write?"

Walter made no effort to hide his contempt for her. "No."

"You're lying. If it didn't happen, you wouldn't know it was even possible. It's not that common."

"So? You're gonna put me in the loony bin?"

"No." She leaned back, looking at him. "It's not dangerous, you know. It won't get worse. It might get better with practice. But you know the letters, right? You know what each letter means?"

"Yes, I'm not stupid."

"Hey, I don't think you are either way. So how bad is it? Describe it to me."

"No."

"Please? I won't tell anyone. I don't think you're crazy. It's just a – I don't know. Some people don't see color, you know? And some people don't hear certain sounds. And some people have problems with reading or writing."

"I'm not a cripple."

"I don't think you're – look, I couldn't write for years myself, alright? I had terrible problems with it and everyone thought there was something wrong with me. They took me to a thousand teachers until my mother finally snapped and let me write with my left hand. People are not all the same."

"My left hand can't write, either."

"Yes, well," she sighed, "that would have been too easy. I'm afraid you'll struggle a bit more with this. But I have an idea."

"Can you fix it?" he said, carefully.

"I don't know. Maybe not. But if you agree to stay with me for one hour every day after school to practice reading and writing, I can offer to base your grades in class mostly on oral exams. And when I call you to answer a question, I'll read it out first. How's that for a start?"

"Why?"

"I told you. I'd like you to do the things I think you're capable of doing. And, besides, if you don't, Dowling will expel you and I'll be immensely

bored without your filthy poetry and rude comebacks."And then I'll be forced to stay home if I want to hear someone sassing me.

He shrugged. "Alright. Beats is home all day. Or in a factory."

"You're a clever boy."

ooo

Over the following week, Erik settled into a comfortable routine. Even his anxiety started to dissipate, very slowly but noticeably.

He would spend mornings taking care of Piotr after Yana left for work; it kept him occupied so that his mind couldn't wander too far. Piotr was a wild boy; he was around four years old already and he had more energy than Erik ever thought a living being could have. There was nothing in the world he didn't want to see, hear, touch or taste. His unwavering enthusiasm brought a smile to Erik's face, and he noticed proudly that Piotr could understand English – Alina had said something about children soaking up language like a sponge. Erik told him stories and made little toys to pass the time.

"Draw a horse!" he held up a piece of paper, with some animals drawn on it.

"I have already. This is a horse." Erik, I pointed out.

"Again!"

He sighed.

"He's alone! He needs a friend!"

I think I can sense Alina's influence here.

"Alright, fine, more horses."

Piotr would often look at Erik when he drew and tried to mimic it. He looked at him all the time, actually, and whatever Erik did – draw, carve,

play, anything – he did it too. Erik used to find it unnerving, but he was used to it now.

"And a man here," Piotr pointed at the paper.

"Fine,". Erik drew a man standing next to the horse, offering a carrot.

"No, like you."

"What?" he looked up at the boy.

"Draw him like you." he covered his face with his hands, peeking at Erik through his fingers.

A child this small is not smart enough to mock me, he reminded himself.
„No. I don't want him to look like me."

„Why?"

„Because it's not a good thing."

„Why?"

„I won't answer that."

„Why?"

„Because you're too young."

„Why?"

Erik rolled his eyes. That was the one English word he wished he hadn't taught him.

„Are you sad?" Piotr asked, putting down his hands.

„No."

„You look sad."

„No, I don't. I look like a mask."

Piotr looked like he might cry at any moment.

„Alright, fine, I'll draw him a mask. But why do you want him to look like me?"

He shrugged. „I dunno. Can he have a violin, too?"

ooo

Alina took a long time to come home. Erik would usually go and wait for her at school – it had become something of a habit; she thought it was romantic and he was not inclined to tell her it was more for his sake than it was for hers – as he would go mad waiting for her at home.

On Friday, two days before Christmas, he waited for her in one of the more secluded parts of the school grounds, feeling less uneasy than only five days ago. He was getting used to this, he realized. He was not only barely visible, but the people who did notice him with her or Jack no longer flinched and stared at the sight of him.

I suppose that's what blending means.

As he stood there silently lost in thought, he noticed that all of the children had left already. Alina was working late again. It didn't matter; even when she worked late she always came home with him and spent the rest of the day in his company. Erik felt like asking for more would be pushing his luck.

Well, not all of the children had left. One boy, around twelve, was pacing around, whistling to himself and looking slightly bored. His clothes were old, oversized, and tattered; although Erik supposed he might just be that small – he was unusually short and very, very thin. His dark hair was cut very short and he wasn't wearing a hat; his face was completely ordinary aside from a pair of striking blue eyes. They were clever eyes, Erik realized, as the boy's gaze darted around the yard nervously. When he thought

everyone had left, he took a rolled cigarette out of his pocket, along with a small matchbox, and promptly lit it up.

The boy noticed Erik and flinched a little, staring at him intently. He had no idea anyone could even see him. How did the kid know he was there? Was a twelve-year-old brat normally this good at sensing danger? Erik was growing annoyed by this little, unnecessarily perceptive, goddamn delinquent who was staring at him shamelessly.

"Aren't you a little too young to be smoking?" Erik, I asked him. I have no idea where that sentence came from. Who am I?

He immediately turned from scared to annoyed as well. "And who are you, my dad?"Hey, he snapped.

"No, I'm the demon that eats bad children", Erik snapped back. At least this sounds more like me.

The boy spread his arms, "So go ahead. Think you'll get a nice meal out of me?" he said, pointing to his small, thin, bony frame.

Erik narrowed his eyes at him. Was this maybe the boy Alina talked about? If so, he could tell why nobody wanted anything to do with him. The boy turned away from him, having lost interest, and continued pacing around the yard.

At that moment, Alina came out, calling after him.

"Walter? You're still here?" she walked up to him, not noticing Erik. To be fair, he was hiding.

He turned to her, hiding the cigarette behind him and subtly dropping it, crushing it with his heel. So you do have a weakness, you little twat. Good to know. Walt walked up to her, trying to get out of Erik's earshot.

"Yes, miss." His expression was vastly different from when he talked to Erik," He looked at the ground, somewhat embarrassed.

"How come? You're free to go, I told you. Holidays just started." Alina smiled and reached out to pat his shoulder lightly. "What do you normally do for Christmas?"

He looked at her angrily, but then said something so quietly that even Erik could barely hear him.

"Sorry?"

"Nothing." He looked at her defiantly, again. "I normally avoid going home for Christmas."

There is not a chance in the universe that sentence won't upset Alina. Erik knew her well; she would probably come home and cry about it later. But right now, her face wasn't giving away any of it. "Hmm," she said, "I suppose you're free, then, and I do desperately need someone to help me eat all these cakes my friend makes at the patisserie."

He seemed shocked by that. "You need what?"

"I'm treating you to some sweets, Walt. I won't tell anyone if you won't. Are you seriously going to miss this opportunity?"She raised her eyebrows at him.

"Uh…"

"No math involved. It's not a trick."

"As I care about math," he said, "I could do math with my mouth full of sweets and my eyes closed!"

"And your hands tied behind your back?"

"What would I eat with, then?"

"I don't know. How creative can you get? Think of it as a challenge," she laughed. "So, are you coming? We just have to wait for my- uh, friend. He said he'd be here soon."

Walter looked embarrassed. "Alright. I don't have anything else to do right now anyway."

Oh hell no. Erik walked up to them, trying to think of the last time he felt such strong and irrational hatred for a child. I wish I was a demon. That would solve this problem. God damn you, Alina, can't you stop picking up lost kittens for a moment? They both noticed him at the same time; Alina's face lit up while Walt filled with dread. Seeing him squirm was Erik's only small pleasure in all of this.

"It seems you're still busy," Erik turned to Alina, trying his best to conceal his annoyance. I waited for you. This was our time. "Do you want to meet later?"

"Oh, I'm not working", she said, turning to Walt. "I'm just taking this young man with us for some well-deserved sweets. He's done some extra work today after school, and he's helped me put up some decorations. This is Walter. "Walt, this is Erik."

"We've met," Erik said, looking at him. "Walter, you didn't tell me you were such a good student."

Walt's eyes were burning with the fury of a thousand suns. "You didn't ask, Mister Demon."

"Walt!" Alina said, "That's not nice."

"Sorry," he said through gritted teeth. Erik silently wished Walter would continue digging himself deeper.

"I'll let you have some cakes with your student," Erik turned to Alina again, "Meet me home later."

"But-,

"It's fine. "Really", he waved his hand in what he really hoped was a peaceful gesture. "You can go. I have something to do anyway." Something

like punching walls in jealousy," Why am I like this? Oh, yes, because she had better things to do and we had goddamn plans –

Alina looked at him suspiciously. "Alright. I'll see you in an hour or so."

Erik nodded. "Good. I might go to Yana. Walter, it was nice meeting you."

"You too, sir," he said. He's picked up on the game. Clever kid.

ooo

Walt was altogether pissed off by the strange masked man who seemingly did his best to tease and annoy him. How did a prick like that get a woman like Teacher Alina? Why does he go around lurking in shadows, poking his nose everywhere, and commenting on everything with that condescending tone of voice? The best thing about his teacher was that she did none of that – she knew when to stop asking questions he didn't want to answer, and she didn't act condescending towards Walt even though everyone else thought he was stupid. But this man was dangerous, he was sure of it. He had the kind of pent-up, barely concealed anger in him that Walt was infallible at noticing.

Perhaps it was like with his parents – his mother was a gentle, weak woman who never raised her voice, and his father was… the opposite. Walt felt a flash of anger at the thought of Teacher Alina getting the same treatment his mother got.

Except she didn't seem afraid of him at all, not to mention that she was far from weak and gentle and occasionally treaded into terrifying. She greeted the strange man with joy instead of the careful worry his mother showed whenever his father arrived home. That was the only thing that didn't fit. He remained silent for a while after the man left.

"Walter, is something wrong?" The teacher asked him, concerned.

"Nothing." They walked together, toward the pastry shop. Walter knew the one; he passed by it often, but he never had any money to spend on sweets.

"Who is that man?" he asked in the end, unable to resist. "Why is he your friend?"

"Hmm?" She raised her eyebrows," "You don't like him?"

"No."

She looked ahead, seemingly in thought. "He became my friend because I helped him escape. People kept him locked up and wanted to hurt him. He's still a bit nervous about that."

Huh. The man was still a prick, but Walter knew all about being locked up and hurt, so he could understand why he would be angry.

Walter remained silent as they reached the shop. It was a small, warm-looking place; passing by it, one could make out the voices of the workers talking in several languages he couldn't recognize. The front was entirely in glass, and through it, Walt could see displayed cakes and cookies – all very colorful and embellished, stacked close to one another. The entire shop looked kitschy inside and out; he could make out the wallpaper inside with its intricate designs of roses, leaves, and vertical stripes. On top of it, the store had Christmas decorations – green branches, red and white paper stars, and little candles. The name of the store was written on the front, but when Walt tried to read it, his head started spinning. He decided not to bother with it. He was on a Christmas break, after all.

Teacher Alina walked confidently into the small pastry shop, holding the door for Walt. He suddenly became aware of his looks, his tattered clothes, and the smell of tobacco on his fingers; he normally avoided these places where people looked at him like he was some kind of a bum, but the prospect of getting free cake was strong enough to keep him there at the moment.

Teachers walked up to the counter, through tables with people sitting and eating, and Walt followed.

"Good afternoon, madam," she said to the lady behind the counter.

"Good afternoon, miss." The chubby, middle-aged woman looked at Walt with strictly dark eyes. "Is your friend coming today?"

"No, madam. Change of plans. This young man is my student; he's getting a well-deserved reward for his good behavior as of late. Now," she raised her voice slightly, a little too much in Walt's opinion, so that she was heard clearly through the small room, "is Yana Petrovna Charkashina [1] here today? You know I love her cakes the most."

"No, miss, she left already", the woman shifted her gaze from Walt, finally.

"What a shame! Yana makes the best cakes, I always say. When is her shift again?"

"Monday. We had some of her from this morning. They're still fresh."

"Wonderful! She's a real asset to your shop," Alina said, in that slightly raised voice, smiling innocently. "I'll be sure to come on Monday again, then."

The dark-eyed woman looked at her with slight suspicion (or annoyance). Walt couldn't tell but said nothing.

"Then, madam, I would like a slice of apple pie," the Teacher said, "and Walt, feel free to pick out whatever you like."

Walt would have found it easier to pick if he knew what any of them tasted like; he was hesitant to waste this rare opportunity eating something that wasn't delicious. He stared at the glass-encased display next to the counter and thought for a moment. He pondered if he might just break the glass and run away with everything; it was a tempting option.

"This one," he finally pointed at a piece of cake that looked like it might be delicious. It was made of chocolate, covered with thick whipped cream, with cherries on top. He hadn't seen it before.

"Which one, dear? I can't see what you're pointing out here. "Just read the label," the lady said, her voice softening considerably after she concluded

he wouldn't steal something and run away.

"S..c…h…" is it getting worse? He started to panic. He can't make it out at all. What the hell?

"The one beneath, dear." Those are German specialties. English names are below." Oh, yes.

Teachers looked at him encouragingly. Did she bring him here to test him? Didn't she promise it wasn't a trick? Walter was getting nervous and squinted intently at the label. The letters were twitching and dancing around, resembling nonsense sticks and circles, but he managed to make it out. The silence was just starting to get deafening when he read it out.

"Black Forest Cake." Thank you, god. Teachers smiled, still looking at him silently.

"Coming right away, dear. You go ahead and sit," the lady said. "I suppose you won't mind if I put some extra cherries and cream on top?"

"Of course, he won't, ma'am," the teacher said, taking out her money. "Put some extra chocolate chips on the side, as well. The young man needs his nutrition."

Alina paid and gestured for Walter to sit at the only current empty table. This shop seemed to be doing well, he thought. He couldn't remember it looking so packed this time last year; maybe it just didn't look packed from the outside. He hadn't exactly been inside until now.

"It's 'Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte' in German," the teacher said, smiling at him quietly. "Good choice. It's a new dessert, very popular back where I'm from."

"You're from Germany?" Walt asked, surprised. Most German immigrants he'd seen so far looked and sounded nothing like her.

"No, but I'm from the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, so I had to learn some German and Hungarian."

"I thought you were Polish," Walt admitted.

"I'm from a province called Croatia," her eyes sparkled with curiosity as she put her elbow on the table and rested one long finger on her temple. "It's a somewhat similar language. Pray to tell, why exactly did you think so?"

Walt stared at her for a moment, petrified. He didn't like it when adults interrogated him like this. Some days they managed to surprise him; he would say too much and they would use the chance to turn it against him. Teacher Alina was not as stuck up as other adults he knew, but it was still probably wrong of him to speak to her so openly; Dowling would be at his neck if he offended her. Except lately, Dowling seemed to be at her neck as well.

"I just did. Sorry."

"Walter," she said, "please tell me. I'm not tricking you, I never do. I'm just curious."

He thought for a moment. "Because of how you dress and talk."

"I don't have an accent anymore. I lived in London for seven years."

"No, but when you say your name you say it like Polish and Russian kids do. You say you're different sometimes." He thought some more. "I saw you talk to Nikolai one day when he was going back from work, and you understood him."

"Wouldn't it be logical to think I'm Russian, then?"

"The Russians have three names. You have two."

She leaned back in her chair, looking at him with a piercing look she usually reserved for when he caused a mess. Walt wondered what he could have said wrong now.

"You're a very clever young man, do you know that?"Well, I asked him. Walter considered running away before he could find out if she was being

sarcastic, but the lady from the counter came at that moment, bringing his cake.

"Alright, Walter, dig in. It's a sin to talk while eating a cake this good," Alina winked at him.

Walter obeyed her order without question for the first time in his life. The cake was amazing – it was soft and moist, and it had layers upon layers of spongy biscuit, cream, and sour cherries. He finished it in a second, along with the extra chocolate chips and the cream he got on the side. He pondered licking the plate, but nobody else was doing it so he decided against it. He couldn't help staring at the crumbs longingly.

His teacher looked up from her pie, having barely eaten half of it.

"Madame Urbina?"Well, she called out. "It seems that this Kirschtorte isn't very filling. I'd say we give him some of Yana's medicine [2] and see if he can finish it with the same vigor."

"Are you sure? The movie isn't popular."

"Yes, I'm sure. One has to try new things occasionally, and Walter seems to be appreciative of Russian culture. Oh, and some juice for the young man, and coffee for me. Please."

Walter did finish medicine with the same vigor, because it was cake, goddammit. It was very different from the last one – thick and creamy, and very, very sweet, with crunchy nuts inside. He felt somewhat guilty that he was using his teacher's goodwill like this, but he was not so stupid to turn down free stuff when it so happened to fall directly on his plate. The teacher finally caught up to him and finished hers; she smiled at him, sipping her dark coffee out of a delicate flowery cup. She looked like she was very used to sipping polite drinks out of delicate cups, unlike normally, when she looked like she was very used to scolding kids and standing for six hours at a time.

"Thank you for keeping me company, Walter," she smiled at him. "It was a pleasure talking to you. I'll see you after the holidays, but right now I have a

very impatient friend waiting for me."

"You have to go?"

"Yes. I'll see you after New Year's. If you wish, you could come to school before that. I'll be there", she laughed.

Walter scoffed. "Like hell. What am I, some kind of suck-up?"

She winked at him again, grabbing her bag as they both stood up. "You're right. It would be completely out of character for you to come to school when you don't have to."

ooo

"Aren't you in a foul mood?", Yana remarked as she opened the door.

"A keen observation."

"Alina is busy saving the world." she raised her eyebrows,"

"One sad boy at a time, yes."

"It's nice of you to wait for her."

"It's not like I have a choice, right?" Erik almost opened the floodgates but stopped himself at the last minute. "I won't –forbid her to do what she wants. I'm not her captor." But, I'd like to be higher on the priority list. I feel kind of trapped myself. I can't live without her – but can I live feeling this unstable all of the time?

Yana gestured for him to sit. "Captor?"

"Someone who keeps you imprisoned. Trapped."

"I know what that means." She squinted at him," "Do you?"

Erik had to laugh at the absurdity of that question.

"Dramatic." She rolled her eyes," "You're not a captor. The whole world is a problem she needs to solve, and she can't help it. But you're not a problem. That's why she needs you."

"What am I?" Erik felt he was quite similar to the problems she solved. Maybe she'll move on to another problem after she thinks she's solved me. It was a thought so terrifying he had to push it back immediately.

"Just a man. Someone to solve problems with her." Yana, you smiled. "If you ask her, she might explain better."

"Thank you." Erik was one of the rare people who might understand why it's a lot to be considered 'just a man. "How's your job?"

"Well, since you three keep insisting very loudly to eat only the cakes I make, in a few weeks I'll be either promoted or arrested." She laughed," "Other customers are getting curious, and asking to try my sweets. Whose silly plan was it?"

"I don't remember. I think it was Jack. We all had different ideas, and this is the only thing we agreed on."

"What were the other ideas?"She asked with obvious curiosity.

"Do you want to hear the legal or illegal ones? It's best if you don't know too much, in case we do go through with some of them."

"Ha!" She said," "You're not going to kill my competition, are you?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny that," Erik smiled against his will.

"And the rest?"

"Alina was going to buy a large number of your cakes and serve them at parent and teacher meetings, and to Tilyou and his workers, and tell them you made them. She might still do that, so be ready. Jack was simply going to fabricate a trend of buying Russian cakes as a luxury food on Coney Island as soon as tourists pour in around March. He might do that as well,

now that I think of it. They both insisted the other one's idea wouldn't work."

"I think they will both work. It's smart." She winked," "I turned Alina down when she offered me help because I want to do it by myself so that no one can say I succeeded because of bribes or something like that. But these are clever ideas. You're all good friends."

"None of us were going to suggest that. Alina and Jack insist on doing things legally when they can, and I find bribery to be very inefficient when compared to, say, death threats."

"Yes, you're such a scary man. Very scary." Her eyes flickered, as she teased him.

"Did you know," she continued, "that Piotr is drawing men in masks all the time?"

"What?"

"I don't mind, I just want to know. Did you tell him to do it?"

"No, why would I? Do you think I want to see that?"

"Well," she snickered, "I asked him why, and he said you showed him how to draw."

"I did. I taught him how to draw everything he asked me, and he asked me to draw myself, so I did. But I didn't tell him to do it. I told him it's not a good thing to look like me."

"Yes. And now he keeps drawing men into masks, saying you're the only one and he has to do more so you wouldn't be lonely." Yana, you started laughing. "He never quite does what you expect him to do, huh?"

Erik chuckled. "He got that from you."

"Thank you for taking care of him," she said. "I've been busy, but it will be worth it when I get a better job and we have more money."

"Of course. Don't mention it."

"And you're very good with him. He's learning so much for such a small boy."

"To be honest, he's just very talented. His father was a musician, right? He has a good ear for music. He could be a musician himself, one day. We'll get him an instrument in a few years and I can teach him if you want."

Yana fell silent for a second and wiped what Erik was quite sure to be a tear from the corner of her eye.

"Thank you. You're a wonderful friend. That would mean a lot." She took a short breath," "I came here so that he could have better chances – not just to survive, but to do something other than serve and fight for other men."

"I understand."

"I'll never forget this," she said. "Piotr is right. More people should be like you."

Erik felt his cheeks getting hot, not knowing what to say to that, but thankfully, a loud knock on Yana's door – Alina's energetic hands, probably – interrupted the silence. Yana hurried to open the door, stopping next to Erik to poke him on the shoulder.

"Don't fight. Be nice to her."

"Yes, I will," he bowed his head at her. "I already promised."

Chapter 10:Gifts

December 1885.; Paris

Antoinette entered her office, quickly closing the door behind her and locking it. What a long day this was, she thought. Training a ballet corpus was nowhere nearly as hard as all the side work one had to do with it, such as managing all the sides involved without stepping on anyone's toes; the teenage ballerinas she could understand - their temper and emotionality were to be expected, but the older performers' behavior she had some trouble explaining to herself and others.

She went straight to her closet, opening it swiftly to reveal a tall, thin figure sitting on the bottom, concealed in the shadows.

"Hello, Erik."

"Madame."

"You're in my closet."

"Do you mind?"

"No, in fact, after a day like this I'd like to join you in here."

He looked at her with slight confusion, but only for a moment before he moved over slightly, making room for her to sit. She sat quietly next to him, embracing her knees to her chest in a gesture entirely unlike her normal strict, poised self. She noticed his discomfort at having someone else in one of his hiding spaces.

"I apologize for intruding. I was wondering whether or not I should rather leave you alone."

"And what did you decide?" he asked dryly. Antoinette shot him a quick warning glance and he shrugged, "this is your closet. Do as you wish."

They sat in silence for a minute, listening to the noise below.

"Are opera houses usually like this?" He asked.

"Yes."

"That's horrendous. How do you handle it?"

"Apparently, by hiding in my closet with a teenage boy."

"Your taste in the company is horrible. And before I was here?" he asked with amusement.

"Before you were here, I was a bit lonelier", she admitted.

He went quiet again, staring straight ahead. Antoinette couldn't see his expression, but she felt it would be better if she let him be for a minute.

"And, I can't help but ask, why are you in my closet to begin with?"

"Same reason as you, because it's quieter. I couldn't think from all the yelling."

Of course, that was not the entire truth; the entire truth would have been that Erik accidentally found himself very close to the stage when the yelling first started and that he also actively disliked yelling so much that someone less proud would have called it fear, or even dread he felt when people raised their voices too close to him. Of course, someone much, much less proud may have even admitted to himself that he went to Antoinette's room because the thought of her calms him down when he's afraid, but Erik's stubborn, eighteen-year-old-trying-to-be-tough heart would have sooner died than admitted it.

"I forgot I had this dress", Antoinette remarked absent-mindedly. "It's been a while since I'd worn it last."

Erik wondered if this was one of those things people say and don't expect a reply - he could never quite figure out when she expected him to continue the conversation, so he mostly erred on the side of caution and kept quiet unless he was sure. He found that most people, judging by Antoinette, talk incredibly often, feeling the need to share things he would never have thought of actually saying out loud. And why would he? He spent over half of his life without anyone who would listen or care about his inner turmoil, and he had grown used to narrating his thoughts to himself in his head. The fact that people narrated their thoughts to others out loud was new and hard to follow.

"Why do people yell so often here?" he asked. Antoinette thought about a good way to put it.

"To get things to go their way, I suppose?"

"It doesn't work, I've noticed, when it comes to you."

"I'm not easily scared", she smiled sharply in the dark. "by fools banging their pots and pans demanding to be heard. I know where I draw the line, and they know it too. The rest is just a scene we all make to prove a point."

"What is the point, in this case? I didn't quite catch that."

"I suppose the point is that we all care about this performance, maybe a little too much, and feel like giving in to others' ideas of what it should look like seems like giving away a piece of yourself", she said, suddenly tired. "If I was being honest. But we can pretend for a minute that they're all fools and I'm the only one right."

"Hm." Erik, not caring about nuances of interpersonal conflict, honestly believed she was always right and they were all fools but decided to err on the side of caution again.

"And I stand by what I said. The ballerinas need more resting time or they will snap. Nobody profits if they get injured and can't dance properly. Or if they get sick of it and don't care anymore."

"Do people normally get sick of it when they do something they like?" he asked. "Is it just a ballet thing?"

"Not just a ballet thing. Everyone gets tired. Don't you?"

"Not like that."

"Really?"

"I don't feel it at all until it becomes too much. Yesterday I played until my fingers were cramped and I had to wrap my hand in a scarf and wait for it to move again. Then I played some more."

"You should practice moderation."

"If I tried, I would probably practice moderation until I felt it was perfect and then I would go insane and die."

"Die of moderation?"

"Don't underestimate me."

"Well, no, most people are not like that", she said, shifting a bit in the cramped space. "There's nothing wrong with resting and doing something else. It's not the end of the world if something isn't perfect. When I gave you that violin, it was supposed to bring you joy, not stress."

"It does bring me joy. So much of it that it stresses me out", he said. "I don't know how to explain it. It makes me more real somehow when I play. When I stop, I feel like I'm fading away again."

She blinked. "Fading away?"

"Like... a ghost. Thoughts start to curl again. I forget what I am, or where I am. But when I pick up the violin, I remember that I'm a musician. So it has to be perfect", he said, feeling his cheeks get very hot suddenly, "I want to be a real musician. I want to be the best. Nobody who hears me will be able to say I'm not real. Or not... human. " Realizing what he said, he felt a strange sense of shame wash over him. "Not that anyone will ever hear me."

Antoinette made a conscious effort not to stare at him at this admission, reminding herself he hated it. Instead, she wrapped one arm lightly around his shoulders, moving slowly so as not to scare him. "My dear boy, there is nobody in this world who would dare deny that you are human, musician or not. If anyone does, you can send them to me, and you've seen today what I do to people who cross me."

He was suddenly very thankful for the near-blackness of the closet space, not daring to move or make a sound. They remained sitting in silence until Antoinette snapped out of it, exclaiming loudly she still has to go pick up her daughter before going home.

"I'll see you again tomorrow, dear. Try not to ruin your fingers for my sanity's sake."

"I'll try, madame. Goodbye."

She shot him another glance before leaving. "Erik, sometimes I think you're the sanest person in this opera."

"Madame, if that were true, the place would have burned down already."

ooo

December 1888.; Paris

"Erik, you're in my closet", Antoinette said opening the door. Every time she found him in her closet, she said the same thing, and every time he gave her a different snarky reply. It had become sort of a tradition in the past five years they'd known each other.

"Am I, really?" he looked around in mock surprise. "Pardon me; I was certain this was Champs-Élysées."

She smiled. "Aren't you in a good mood today?"

"I have something to tell you", Erik smiled. "My house is finished."

"Oh, lovely!" She beamed up. "Will you show it to me?"

"Follow me", he whispered mischievously as he snuck silently out of the room. Antoinette followed, trusting that he had checked if anyone was left on their floor before moving so openly in the hallways. Erik hurried down the hall and opened an innocent-looking storage door at the end.

"In here."

"Is this another one? I thought it was just a storage room", she remarked, slightly confused.

"Oh, it was until recently. I added this", he said, pushing an almost invisible loose brick in the wall. The opposite wall moved with a quiet hiss and he leaned on it to push it further. "It connects to the tunnels. I only had to tear down one thin wall to connect them; I think it may have been intended for this at some point. Either way, you can now get to me from your floor directly", he said, pointing proudly at the entrance. Antoinette lifted her skirt a little and stepped into the small storage room, leaning to look into the dark tunnels. She felt cold air on her face from down below, but couldn't see anything. It always shocked her when she entered the tunnels - how cold and damp it was down in the catacombs, and how guilty she felt that he had to spend his days down there.

"I'll add some sort of light source later if I can, but you may have to bring a candle for now", he said, slightly embarrassed. "I'll lead. Be careful, I've set alarms here and over there", he pointed at some invisible points on the floor. "Just in case anyone stumbles upon this. I can't have people wandering around here." He stepped into the tunnel, waiting for her to light a candle and follow him. Antoinette held it high above her, inspecting the walls for signs of structural weaknesses - or, to be fair, poisonous mold. It seemed safe enough.

"What happens when you trigger the alarm?" she asked as he pointed at more of the traps, repeating that she has to remember them all.

"Depends on the trap."

"I won't like this, will I?"

He tried to shrug casually, but she saw that the comment got to him. "The ones close to the surface will simply sound the alarm in my house, and create some kind of barrier to prevent the person from continuing further."

"And?"

"And the ones on the deeper levels", he said quickly, "will incapacitate the person in some way, usually with blunt force. The idea is that they faint and I can carry them up before they wake up. They're not lethal."

"No?" Antoinette said with the voice she usually used when she knew someone was lying to her. She perfected that voice in the past two decades; it could be unnerving to the faint-hearted.

"One of them can be. But only if you persist", he said, growing more upset. "Listen, if someone does get to the fifth underground level, and keeps pushing further against warning and without my permission, I can only assume they're after me. And in that case, I'd hate for them to find me."

"That's a fair compromise, I suppose", she said. "I'm glad you decided to listen to me."

"It's for your sake, too. You won't be hurt no matter what, if you need to get to me", he said earnestly. They walked carefully through the corridors, all the way to the very bottom. "There's another one here. We're almost down."

The fifth underground level was very, very cold, Antoinette noticed, and pitch-black. That is until they turned around a corner and she suddenly saw it.

The underground lake was illuminated by the warm faint light of oil lamps, and close to the shore was a tiny, but functional, house. It was made from materials left over from various Opera projects and the construction of the building itself - but brought together so carefully that she would not have guessed it if she wasn't an accomplice in stealing those same materials.

Erik grinned. "What do you think?"

"It looks beautiful", she breathed. "Show me inside."

He walked ahead of her with a noticeable skip in his step, opening the door. "Be my guest, Madame Giry", he beamed proudly.

"Oh, monsieur, you're so kind", she winked. Seeing him like this was one of the proudest moments of her life - if someone had told her that the skinny boy who couldn't speak would be inviting her for tea in his own house five years later, she would never have believed them.

The interior was small, divided into several rooms, he explained - sleeping room, bathroom, living room, and study. There was no point in having a kitchen since cooking so low underground was too tricky, and it was simpler to just grab leftovers from the staff kitchen when the cooks went home (Antoinette was fairly sure that he simply forgot to include it, seeing as he never really learned how to cook or even eat regularly, for that matter, but decided to keep quiet). The bedroom had a small bed and closet and not much else, but the living room and study were so intricately decorated that she couldn't help but smile. There was a small sitting couch and coffee table, a working desk in the study, and bookshelves on every wall. He built them all himself, he explained. There were drawings and paintings - some stolen from above, some his own; endless books on music, sheet paper, several instruments, sculptures, memorabilia stolen from sets of his favorite plays, mechanisms, and music boxes that he built himself. Erik had become something of a magpie, collecting pretty things that reminded him of happy days, and they were all here - some sweet, some eerie, some dramatically sad. It would have been a strange place for someone with a more down-to-earth view of the world and interior design, but to Erik, it must have been like having a perfect, cozy nest just for himself.

"This is all so beautiful", she said for the third time as he showed her around.

He was still beaming. "Yes. And it's mine. And you can come anytime you want, but nobody else can find me." He gestured for her to sit. "I've made tea for you if you want to stay."

"Oh, absolutely", she sat down. "I'd also like to hear where you got that statue over there because I'm fairly certain we had a very similar one disappear a few years ago".

ooo

December 1893.; Paris

Bewildered and panicked, Antoinette climbed back into her room and closed the door behind her. She felt her heart beating in her throat as she leaned her back on the door and sighed deeply. It took her a few seconds to compose herself again after all that had happened.

He was gone. They didn't find him.

She was almost certain she would see her own - child, no, he was hardly a child anymore - she would see him imprisoned, chained, or simply killed by the mob. She paced around the room nervously, trying to think. This was impossible. He had to go somewhere. She had to find him. She couldn't just leave him like this.

She opened the door to her closet, acting more on some stupid, desperate hope than any other reason.

He was sitting at the bottom, half-covered in darkness, with his face bare and his mask in his hands. He didn't move or look at her at all when she opened the room, staring straight ahead; his eyes were two empty, bottomless pits.

She didn't quite know what to say. Should she hug him, cry and say how worried she was something would happen to him? Should she mention how furious she was about all that he's done? Should she even ask how the hell he managed to escape without a trace when the mob was practically at his door already?

"Erik, you're in my closet." The words ran hollow and ridiculous.

"I have nowhere to go", he whispered.

Antoinette cast a nervous glance over her shoulder. Could someone hear them? Probably not. Everyone was still on the ground floor when she left, the police slowly calming the bloodthirsty mob down and sending them home. They would probably not check her twice, as she wasn't causing any problems.

But they might start searching around again when it all clears.

"We need to leave soon, and quietly", she whispered, turning back to him. "It's not safe. Take this cloak and I'll take you out when a path clears." Somehow. They both knew their way around the labyrinthine building better than almost anyone, and the cold weather would allow her to bundle him up in a cloak and scarf without suspicion. The rest would be up to improvisation and luck.

"I have nowhere to go", he repeated.

She didn't know what to say to that. She slowly lowered herself to the closet floor next to him.

"You're going with me. We'll think of something."

He didn't appear to register what she said, still staring blindly ahead of him until he finally broke the silence.

"They found my home. Burned it to the ground. They wanted me dead."

"I'm sorry, dear."

"You were with them", he turned to her. "Did you lead them to me?" She noticed his eyes were red and glistening and wondered if it was because of all the smoke that was down there.

Antoinette's eyes widened with shock. "I was there to stall them, to make them listen to reason. I led them around the catacombs to buy you some time. I was trying to help you! They would have gone down anyway, with or without me! Don't you think it was a better idea to come along and try to keep them under control than let them do whatever?"

He kept silent.

"If you thought I betrayed you, why did you come back to me?" She demanded.

"I have nowhere to go", he repeated. "I thought I might as well come and ask." He also had nobody else in the entire world to go to. There were two outcomes to that: either she was still on his side and he was safe coming here, or she betrayed him and would call upon the angry mob to finish him off as soon as she found him here.

Both were equally appealing. If he was to die by her hand, it would have been alright with him.

She sat next to him. "I was trying to help you. As I will help you now."

He turned away from her and stared into the dark again. "But you did show him down there, didn't you?" he said quietly. "De Chagny. He would not have found it by himself."

"Oh. That I did." She paused. "I offered to show him the way, hoping he'd resolve everything before the mob got to you. I made him promise he wouldn't hurt- do anything rash before he talked to you. I told him you'd do the right thing, in the end."

She took another long breath before continuing, "It was wrong, what you did on the stage. You... have not been yourself lately. I was afraid. But you still did the right thing, in the end."

She could barely make out that Erik's shoulders were starting to shake in the darkness of the closet. His mask made a soft bump as he dropped it and buried his face in his hands.

"But I love her."

"I know."

"Is this it? The only right thing I did was to release her from me?" during the past few months, Erik had been... completely insane, to be honest, but

that was beside the point. He was frightening, aggressive, and loud. The person currently sobbing quietly on Antoinette's floor was the same teenage boy she met eleven years ago. "Is that what I am, in the end, after all? Is this all I can hope for?"

"You are exactly what I thought you were", she said. After a short hesitation, she reached out to put her hand very lightly on his head, stroking his hair slowly like an upset child. "You're a good enough man to not do to others what has been done to you. It was simply not meant to be, and it's nobody's fault. But you're a good man, and you let her go, and I'm proud of you."

"You should have let them have me", he shook his head, trying to calm down.

"If it was me, would you have done that?" She raised her eyebrows.

"No", he sniffed. "I would have torn this place to pieces looking for you, and I'd kill everyone who stood in my way."

"If I found you dead, Erik, I assure you I would have burned down a lot more than this theatre", she said quietly, standing up. "We have to go. We'll talk more later, but we're not safe yet."

"Where are we going?"

"Back to the beginning, I suppose", she said, digging through the closet for a big enough cloak for him. "Just you and I, hiding in my apartment."

He stood up slowly, getting carefully out of her way. His movements were strange - quiet, eerie, like when she first found him.

"Here, put this on. Follow my lead and I'll get us out."

He took the cloak and shawl from her hands, putting them on. "Merci, Maman", he remarked absentmindedly, looking at some invisible point in the wall.

She decided not to comment on it as they exited the room and walked swiftly through one of the less-known back doors and into the dark, snowy night.

ooo

December 1894; New York

Erik turned the small ring over between his fingers, thinking.

He didn't need it.

He didn't need to sell it, either. He wasn't that poor anymore, and he had survived without selling it for this long.

It felt wrong to have it. It felt wrong to discard it.

Maybe I should try to give it to Alina. To see if it's maybe the ring that's cursed.

It would prove nothing, genius. You're the one giving it in both cases.

I mean, yes. He sighed, putting it back in his pocket.

He should probably sell it. Yana gave me the last thing she had of her late husband, and Alina gave me a year of her life to make sure I wouldn't die. Besides, the ring bore bad memories. It would be better to just sell it and be done with it. Maybe buy something nice for people who care about him.

He stood in the shadows in front of the pawn shop. Lost in thought, he didn't even notice at first that the shop was dark inside and the little cardboard piece on the door read „CLOSED". What time is it, even? What day is it? It was that strange time between Christmas and New Year when everything seemed to be in sort of a limbo: Coney Island worked, but even the usually energetic staff seemed... tired. Everyone seemed to be waiting for something. The atmosphere affected even him, which was strange considering he normally couldn't care less what day it was.

Since Yana was orthodox and Jack didn't care, Alina agreed, somewhat begrudgingly, to have them all celebrate New Year together instead of Christmas. Which meant they spent Christmas together, just the two of them, for a change. But it also meant she would spend one more week preparing.

He heard Jack coming from a mile away and chose to ignore him, hoping he would leave and let him think in peace.

„Selling family legacy, are you?" he asked approaching.

„No, I'm thinking about buying actually."

„Something in mind?"

„I was going to buy this sign that says 'CLOSED' and stick it on my back, just so people would stop coming up to me and talking", Erik said, looking at the storefront.

Jack snorted. „There are better pawn shops around. This one might be among the worst, price-wise. It's not even doing that well. Happens when you rob too many customers."

„That's fine. I don't care about money." He was pretty sure any money he would get from this thing would be cursed as well if he used it. I should just give it all to the first beggar I see.

„Which tells me you're selling", Jack bowed his head a little. „You'd care if you had to give your hard-earned money to some overpricing asshole. You want to get rid of something."

„Yes", Erik looked at him. „one specific nosy man, among other things."

Jack shrugged. „I came looking for you because of work. I had no idea I'd interrupt something private."

„What is it, then?" Erik turned from the pawn shop and started walking, Jack following next to him.

„Well", he smiled, „I have scheduled construction to start on January 3rd. I thought you might want to, you know, save the date. Come there to see it."

„Am I needed?" Erik asked. „I thought my blueprints were very thorough. For that specific reason."

„As a supervisor, you're not needed. I can take care of that."

„I have other things to do, then."

„Moving on to better things already?" Jack smiled. „How's composing?"

„Good enough so far."

"You're very talented", he remarked. "Have you considered a music career?"

"No."

"Why not?", he cocked his head slightly. "If you don't want to perform, that's one thing. But your compositions are good enough that you could get noticed, you know. You have no problem working hard enough to succeed. Don't you want it?", he smiled. "Recognition? Appreciation? For your art?"

"It's just a stupid pastime", Erik hissed. "Let it go." A year ago, he might have just attacked him on the spot. His first instinct was to make him pay for mocking him like this; it's obvious why all this will never happen for so many reasons and I doubt Jack is blind enough not to see them. Why torment me with stories and false hopes? Is he getting back at me for something? He never quite got used to Jack and his constant torrent of sarcasm and smugness. Most of the time Erik made it bluntly clear he wanted to keep his distance from him and never bothered trying to befriend him in any meaningful way.

Well, unless he means it. In which case he's been trying to help me, and I'm an ass.

(Unknown to Erik, Jack was not hostile toward him at all; he considered Erik a friend and though he didn't quite understand his behavior, he respected him. Used to banter and joke among his other mostly male

friends, he couldn't figure out why Erik would sometimes seem to go along with his attempts to make conversation only to withdraw into himself and refuse to engage any further. It made him slightly frustrated.)

Erik kept silent until he calmed down. They wandered around the snow-covered streets for a while. Everyone they passed looked equally lost in time and space, barely looking at them. Jack walked next to him quietly until he stopped and waved his hand to point at another pawn shop.

"I've changed my mind", Erik remarked walking right past it. He could see Jack trying not to roll his eyes from the corner of his eye. "I did want to be a musician when I was younger. I never had the opportunity", he admitted. He shot a glance at Jack to see how he would react. Jack's face softened at the confession, losing some of the apparent smugness and sarcasm.

"Opportunities can be arranged", he said. "The rest is up to you. Just something to think about."

Erik nodded. "Thank you", he added after a while. He didn't want to elaborate, and Jack didn't insist.

After Jack left, Erik somehow ended up on that rocky beach again. Funny how this happens. He walked in silence, interrupted only by an occasional seagull crying in the distance, through the frozen sand and pebbles, between the sharp cliffs.

He walked to the very edge of the shoreline and stood there, tiny waves almost touching the tips of his shoes, and looked across the sea. The overcast skies melted with the cold grey sea in the distance, making it seem as though he was under an incredibly large glass dome. The view was unusually clear; Erik thought if he squinted enough he might see the coast of Europe outlined in the distance.

"It feels wrong to get rid of you", he said to the far-away coast of Europe, and the cursed thing in his pocket, and to himself.

None of them answered.

"Whatever I do, it feels wrong anyway", he continued. He didn't care how insane it would seem if someone accidentally found him. Talking out loud somehow lifted some of the stuffing he felt in his lungs and heart, and he thought if he squinted enough he would also see grey clouds rising out of his mouth and joining with the cloudy sky above.

"I deserve to drag this with me to my grave", he said, taking out the ring again and twirling it between his fingers. "And I... don't want to forget you", he whispered to the horizon.

The horizon was silent.

"But that would hurt even more people", he continued. "Antoinette was right. Hating myself doesn't absolve me of what I did any more than blaming others would. The only thing I can do is to think of others for a change."

He was growing tired of the stupid sea silently judging him at this point, but he went on.

"And, and maybe I don't deserve to be happy, but she does, and I have to at least try for her sake", he fumbled. "So I have to let this go, even if I do deserve to have it weighing me down to hell because I'd drag her down with me and I can't have that happen."

Erik took a deep breath and threw the ring as far into the sea as he could. It flickered for a moment before disappearing. He felt a faint prick of sadness as it disappeared, but it passed as suddenly as it came.

"Goodbye, then, I suppose", he said flatly, turning back towards the island.

ooo

Back in the kitchen of Erik's and Alina's house, Alina and Yana used the precious spare time they had over the holidays to spend together. Piotr was already asleep in Alina's room, having spent all of his enormous energy reserves asking hard questions.

„I think we should make rum cakes", Alina mused.

„Good idea" Yana sifted through the small notebook of recipes she had written down over the years. „Why not just be honest and admit you don't like cooking unless you're drunk?"

Alina opened her mouth, then closed it again. „Not true."

„Really?"

She looked to the side, guiltily. „It might be a somewhat tedious activity. And I'm nowhere near as good at it as you are. But I like making sweets. I like feeding people, I don't know, it makes me feel like I'm taking care of them."

„Hmm." Yana smiled a little, not commenting on the obvious. „Do you know of any recipes with rakija?"

„Just one."

„Yes?"

„Get stupid drunk with rakija, then make whatever."

„No wonder you never learned how to cook properly. I've only got drunk twice in my life", Yana admitted. „Once when I married Mikita, and once when he died."

„Oh." Alina shifted. She didn't know what to say.

„It's irresponsible when you have a baby."

„Well, technically, he's not a baby anymore. And Erik can watch him when he gets home if he wakes up", Alina said. „Where is Erik, anyway?" a little shadow of fear passed through her eyes momentarily, before disappearing again.

„Sulking on the roof", Yana pointed her finger at the ceiling nonchalantly.

„What? How do you know that? Why is he on the roof?"

„I think he just likes it up there." Yana stood up, navigating her way through the tiny kitchen. What Alina lacked in inspiration when it came to housekeeping, she made up for in discipline. Everything was quite tidy and organized, and Yana had no problem finding anything she needed in the room; however, it was clear that Alina didn't enjoy cooking or cleaning that much, as the room lacked that special touch only someone like Yana who loved being at home could give it. Alina also didn't decorate that much until the holidays rolled around - she seemed to enjoy her home being simple and Yana had to admit there was a certain elegance to it (even though she'd never trade it for her own complex embroidered curtains). Alina once admitted she grew up surrounded by kitsch and felt overwhelmed by it; she decided to make her own home more minimalistic and elegant - whereas Yana, growing up dirt poor, relished every opportunity to bring a little bit of color into her surroundings. Now, however, the obvious outlier was an entire armada of paper stars scattered and stuck everywhere, which Yana was also careful not to comment too much on.

She rolled up her sleeves. "I think vanilla moons are the right choice today."

"Those are decidedly rumless cookies, even I know that."

"I don't want to rob you of your rum, or you will be too bored while we work."

ooo

Erik was sitting in his favorite spot on the roof, admiring the stars when Alina's voice shook him from thinking.

„Erik!"

He looked down.

„Why are you on the roof? You'll freeze!"

„Because I like it. What do you want?"

Alina was already attempting to climb, with Yana holding her up from below.

„Wait!"

Too late. She pulled herself up on the lowest edge of the roof and, stumbling a little, stood up and wiped her dress. She then offered a hand to Yana, who climbed with an equal lack of feminine grace.

What? Alina doesn't stumble. She's well-coordinated. „What are you-„

„We came here to ask you what your favorite food was!"

„I don't have one."

They walked, very slowly and carefully, toward him. Erik was starting to panic somewhat - the roof wasn't so high that they would die if they fell, but it was still highly unnerving. „Are you trying to break something?"

„Noooo. Nonono." Alina smiled. „Relax."

„Don't tell me to„

„Erik", Yana said. „I think you should talk to us. Tell us. Your favorite food." She was smiling a little sweeter than usual.

„What in the seven hells is wrong with the two of you?"

„Nothing", they said in unison, both looking equally guilty. They looked at each other and burst out laughing. „We're celebrating", Alina added. „New Years and whatnot."

He looked at them both, suddenly feeling stupid. „Are you two- "

„Tipsy, a little, maybe", Alina slowly sat to his right, with Yana on her other side. „But we saved you a little. Oh, the stars are wonderful tonight! How is the sky so clear suddenly? It was so cloudy earlier today."

„What about-„

„He's well-fed and fast asleep", Yana interrupted. „What kind of mother do you think I am?"

„Fair enough." I think it might be best if I go along with this without arguing.

"Anyway, your favorite food", Yana continued. "Do you know how long it took us to find your little secret ladder? Show some respect."

"I think it's, uh, potatoes."

"Wrong", Alina said, pushing her hands into her pockets. "I have another question for you."

"I'll try harder this time", he said. To be fair, this is quite funny.

"How many bottles of rum and how many cookies can you fit in the pockets of one standard-size female wool coat, prov-provided that the lining is ripped and the interior is one large hole barely holding itself together?", she said, barely containing her laughter.

"Is the coat yours?"

"No hints", she pointed her finger at him strictly.

"I would say it depends on how determined you are, but at least two bottles and twenty-five cookies before it breaks", he scratched his chin pretending to think hard, "is the answer to your first question 'rum and cookies?"

"Yesss."

"Can I have some?"

"God bless you", she said, reaching deep in her pockets and taking out a small bottle and a napkin. Passing him the bottle, she unfolded the napkin to reveal a handful of cookies while he took a swig.

"You guessed wrong, by the way", she said. "But the riddle may have been unfair. The coat can fit one bottle of rum, an obscene amount of cookies,

and this", she said, taking another napkin from her pocket and unwrapping it. She held in her palm another small cookie - at least it looked like a cookie - in the shape of a heart, glazed with something red and shiny and decorated with thin white lines along the edges. In the center of the heart, a tiny mirror stood, surrounded by white flowers. "Technically, if you peel the red wax and the ornaments it's edible, but I wouldn't recommend it. It's a traditional Croatian ornament."

"It's very lovely", he said. "What do you call it?" She seemed very happy whenever he showed interest in her stories about Croatia, so he tried to encourage her to talk about it more. He leaned closer to see the object while passing the bottle to Yana. He could feel the beginning of a warm buzz in his mouth and stomach. You girls are sturdier than you look. This is some strong liquor.

"Licitar", Alina said. "It's an old custom for young ladies to bake and decorate them, and then give them to their suitors", she held out the little heart in the palm of her hand, grinning drunkenly and mischievously.

Erik laughed, "We're very traditional, aren't we?" He took the ornament from her and looked at it more closely. "Why is this piece of glass in the middle? It's a mirror?"

"Yesss. I am dunno. They always have it, I think it's just s'posed to be there", she shrugged with a smile. He reached out to plant a small kiss on her cheek.

„I feel like you're making sort of a deliberate effort to soften my edges", Erik said with a smile.

Alina gasped dramatically. „I would never." Yana snickered behind her.

"In my village", Yana said, "when the girls liked someone, it was very shameful to show it. You couldn't do anything that your elders would think is - I think the word is flirting. You can't show a boy you like him until he makes a lot of effort. At least not in front of your mother."

"Did anyone abide, or did you just get sneakier?" Alina wondered.

"Božemoj, Alina, what do you think? I could tell Mikita exactly when and where I wanted to meet him just with my eyes", she laughed. "Nothing is harder to stop than a girl who's decided."

"True", Alina nodded solemnly.

"Yes. So, I need to go", she got up and walked towards the ladder. "Piotr should wake up in his bed. It was nice seeing you two."

"We'll walk you back", Erik offered, standing up. Alina followed, unsure on her feet. He helped them down, slowly and carefully, and followed Yana as she carried Piotr over to their home.

They walked back alone, Alina still stumbling and smiling to herself.

"You can't walk, darling", he remarked. She giggled. "Since we're so traditional already, will you let me help you?"

"Sure", she said, grabbing his sleeve, but Erik had something else in mind.

"That's a tad boring for my taste. Hold on", He reached down around her back and knees and picked her up with both arms, and she had enough composure to wrap her arms around his neck to hold on so he wouldn't drop her. "That's better."

"Hey!"

"Do you want me to put you down?"

"No."

"Alright", Erik smiled as he started walking towards our house. I hope my right arm doesn't change its mind about being fully healed. "Remember when you carried me home after I got attacked?"

"Uh-huh." She seemed to be drifting off, looking sleepier by the minute. "Well, I sort of just propped you up." She frowned at the memory.

"I'm just returning the favor", he said. "Besides, from the standpoint of traditional courting, you're getting the proper treatment, young lady."

"You French people sure don't take romance lightly."

"Don't I know it."

He managed to carry her through the short distance from their home in peaceful silence. Alina closed her eyes; she was only half awake as Erik carefully opened the door. It was a small miracle that he pulled it off, given that he was still slightly drunk.

"Do you think I could be a musician?" He asked nobody in particular as he carried her across the doorway.

"Dumb question", she yawned into his coat. "You have always been a musician."

Not what I meant, but a fair answer anyway, he decided. Alina didn't even stir as he lowered her onto her bed and covered her with all of her three blankets.

Chapter 11:Progress

February 1895, Coney Island

Walter stood behind the back door to the small patisserie, trying to enjoy his cigarette in peace. He had a lot on his mind, and a long day behind him, and was altogether reluctant to go out and show his face to the world.

The heavens seemed reluctant to grant him that mercy, as a small, pale young woman with ash-blond hair came out, carrying a large number of crumbs in her apron, and shook it out on the ground instead of in the trash. Walter suddenly realized why there were so many birds on this street as of late. He wondered if the other women in the pastry shop were alright with her doing that, or if they even knew.

She noticed him as she turned around, and pointed a strict finger at him. „Too young to smoke."

„I won't tell anyone if you won't", Walter grinned. „What's with the crumbs?"

She looked around sadly. „The birds are hungry."

„Aren't you?" Walt asked.

She sighed. „It's bad luck to let birds die in winter. Spring is silent, and summer is poor. No fruit. No wheat. Veles doesn't feed people who don't care for his creatures."

„Veles?" he raised his eyebrows. Walter's highly critical mind rarely had time for superstitions, but he was growing curious. The woman didn't seem eager to elaborate.

„Yes." She hurried toward the exit, stopping at the door. „Are you Walter?"

„I... am", he said slowly. „Why?"

„Your teacher left something for you, but you don't get it if you don't drop that disgusting thing", she pointed at the cigarette. She came back a minute later, waited stubbornly for Walt to throw away his cigarette, and handed him a napkin with two slices of cake. „Go now. I have work to do." Walter took the napkin and obediently scurried off, wondering when his day started going so well.

His lessons were going fine despite taking a horrible amount of his energy and patience, and he had to admit reading had become a tiny bit less of a nuisance. His mother would even ask him to read things for her out loud - she was nearsighted and didn't want to bother. He was catching up to the other kids, as teacher Alina made sure to keep her promise and question him loudly in front of the class instead of giving him written tests. She was good at it; on the surface, it seemed as though she was just as strict as before, even more so because she seemed to call his name all the time in class. Walter was thankful for it all. He didn't want to seem like some sort of teacher's pet all of a sudden.

He stopped in front of the construction site and sat on the most unassuming part of the pavement, eating his cake. His head and hands were cold already, but he didn't feel like going home yet. The bruises on his arms reminded him of what was waiting there.

„Hey, mister Demon", he said to the shadowy wall behind him.

„Hello, Walter", the wall replied. „What do you want?"

Walter shrugged. „I'm just watching them make the new park, in peace, like you."

Erik rolled his eyes behind him. So much about peace.

„Teacher Alina said you know how to make these", he pointed at the large Ferris wheel. „Yeah?"

„Yes." And I do wish she would stop reminding people of my existence.

„I'd like to visit it someday", Walter mused. „Looks fun."

„Tell Alina that. I'm sure she'll take you."

„No way", Walter said, suddenly annoyed. „I don't need charity. If I visit it, I'll take my damn self."

„Fair enough." Erik could very much understand the kid and would have felt bad for him if only he wasn't so annoyingly intruding in his own space. Walter sat in silence, finishing his snack.

„Are they hard to build? It doesn't look that hard", he asked after a while.

„Yes and no", Erik replied absentmindedly. Walter made pauses just long enough to make him hope he was done talking and retreat into his thoughts again.

„I think I could do it", Walter asserted. „Last year, I built the best treehouse, you can ask anyone. It even had an elevator, so you could sit in a bucket and someone would pull you up instead of climbing the – „

„That sounds impressive", Erik said, taking out a piece of paper and scribbling on it. „I think I could use someone like you. I need someone to take messages for me to the construction site. Give this to Jack Franklin, and tell him it's from his business partner. I want to know what they're doing, so listen to Jack, watch carefully and tell me." He folded the paper and held it out to Walt, along with a few coins. „Can you do that? I'll keep paying you as long as I don't have to go there and talk to them myself."

Walter looked at the amount of money presented to him. „You sure hate talking to people a lot."

„You have no idea", Erik smiled sharply at him.

Walt shrugged. It was hardly any of his business; if this madman wanted to throw obscene amounts of money at him for easy tasks that were perfectly fine. He took the note and the money and left quickly.

Erik sighed in relief. To be fair, it wasn't that much money, but he would have paid a lot more to have the boy leave.

Walt hurried through the construction site, avoiding annoyed looks from the workers. He wished he could stop and look at what they were doing – he'd never been to an amusement park and he was curious; what's more, he had always been curious to find out how they built those complex mechanisms. He was growing bored of stealing his father's pocket watch when he was asleep to take it apart and reassemble it. But right now the workers wanted to kick him out of there, so he sped up. Someone shouted behind him.

„Hey, kid! You can't be here!"

His first instinct was to start running, but he realized he wouldn't find Jack Franklin that way. So he stopped against his will and turned around, thinking of the money.

„Hello, mister. I have a message for Mr. Jack Franklin. It's from his business partner", he recited, taking out the note. „Where is he?"

The man stopped, confused. Yes, Walt looked pretty much like any street urchin, but most street urchins didn't know the boss' name. He looked him over suspiciously and gestured for him to follow.

He pointed at the boyish, curly-haired man in his thirties standing not far from there, talking to some more important-looking workers. He stopped and frowned when he saw Walt, and he had a very uncomfortable feeling that the man knew him, even though Walt was quite sure he didn't know Jack Franklin.

„Good day, sir. I have a letter for you. It's from your business partner." Walt said obediently, giving him the note and waiting for the man to read it.

Jack unfolded the letter, read it quickly, and looked over at the boy with a suspicious frown on his face. This was... surprisingly convenient.

„You didn't read this, did you, boy?"

Walt shook his head. He was not so curious to bother trying to decipher people's handwriting; printed letters were a chore enough for him.

„Alright, then, it seems I might have some more work for you. Follow me", he said. „I need you to listen carefully and repeat what I say to the man who gave this to you. And I need you to describe to him what I show you. Got it?" his tone was stern, but he was looking at Walt with a sort of amusement.

„Yes, sir." Walt picked up the pace to follow the man.

„Alright. Let's start here", Jack said. It seemed Walt would get some new pastimes after all. He hoped they didn't all work on the same principle as his father's pocket watch.

Jack folded the letter in his pocket, grinning internally. It seemed that he had misjudged his business partner.

Jack, I can see that they're making the outer walls on the southern building wooden, and I don't like it. If it catches fire, it's all going down in one spectacular blaze. I don't care if they think it's all right. They are either stupid or lying to you.

Also, please get this goddamn kid off my back. If you have any messages, send them through him, show him around and tell him what they're doing and he'll repeat it back to me. Give him toys and show him rides to try it all out. I don't care as long as you keep him occupied. Give him a hat and some new gloves. I don't want him to freeze to death. Erik.

ooo

A few hours later, Erik entered his home frowning absentmindedly at the crude sketch of a disassembled mechanical toy that Jack gave him after Walter left. Next to it, in horrible handwriting, was a single sentence.

Meh, these are like clocks.

„Alina?" he called out.

„Yes?" he heard her voice from the other room as she stood up to greet him.

„Are all children smart and then get dumber as they grow, or is it just this one that's particularly clever?" He looked up from the note, his eyes softening as she entered the room.

„Uh. Both, I think", she stood next to him to look at the scribble. „Oh."

„You were right, then", Erik said, passing it to her. „He's a clever kid. You can use this."

„Oh- thank you." she took it. „If he's promising, they might give him a scholarship for some engineering school or something, they seem to love those around here. If I can coerce him into actually showing his skills, that is."

Erik nodded. „In any case, I have some more things to do. I'll come back late, don't wait for me."

Alina looked up with obvious worry in her eyes. „Where are you going?"

„Lower Manhattan. I'm – doing some research. I'll tell you about it later."

„But why are you going out so late?" Alina realized her voice trembled a tiny bit as she spoke; Erik must have realized it as well because he looked at her in confusion.

„It will be alright. I'll be careful."

She nodded, biting her nail. She didn't look at him. „I just – I don't want anything to happen."

Oh. „I can take care of myself", he said. „I'll be back soon."

She still didn't look convinced.

„Listen", he said, slightly annoyed. „Do you want to keep me locked inside here all the time so you wouldn't worry about me?" Oh, good God in

heavens, this has to be the most ironic, hypocritical thing I have ever uttered out loud. I'm surprised I haven't been struck by lightning already.

She shook her head. Alina hated, hated, hated this feeling. She desired freedom to do whatever she wished all her life; she craved it so much that the idea of limiting someone else's freedom to go wander around for the peace of her mind made her slightly nauseous. Even if it was reasonable to stay out of trouble.

To be fair, Erik thought, I have no right to be annoyed. I think I know how she feels, and I have a distinct memory of handling it far worse back then.

Oh, but I hate answering anybody, I do.

But she just seems... worried. The last time I was out all night, my skull nearly ended in pieces.

„Would it help if I promised to be careful, and the next time I go, I can take you with me and show you what I'm doing?" He said carefully. It's a strange kind of feeling to try giving someone else the consolation you wish you were given yourself.

„Alright", she said, seemingly calmer.

„I'll be back soon." He moved a stray strand of hair from her forehead, planted a light kiss where it was, and left.

ooo

It was a bright, moonlit evening in New York, and it promised to turn into a bright, moonlit night; the kind Erik loved ever since he was – well, old enough – to go out and wander alone, lost in his thoughts. The people in Manhattan sped through the snowy streets, eager to get home and into the warm sanctuary of their beds; nobody paid any attention to him. Erik, in his several layers of mask, scarf, hat, and cloak was not standing out in any way against the crowd. He made his way across Lower Manhattan with ease, remembering the path to his destination. The said destination seemed to be a building, unnoticeable in an otherwise also unnoticeable

neighborhood – it was a small venue that could serve as both a theatre and a concert hall, built for the needs of several music and drama schools. It was new, and some parts of it were still unfinished; it seemed that whoever built it didn't have as much money as they imagined they did. Erik liked the building from the first moment he laid eyes on it; the simple outer facade hid a relatively complex building that had halls and rooms in places he didn't expect them to be. He had been here once before and decided he'd come back to listen. Various bands and small chamber orchestras rented the place often for rehearsals, and today was one of those days. Erik entered swiftly and soundlessly through a small backdoor entrance – funny how there are certain times and places people let down their guard, and funny how predictable they always are. The door was unlocked; the man who cleaned the place and served as a receptionist at times had just sneaked out to have a sandwich and a cigarette and was hiding behind the corner.

Once he was inside, it was simply a matter of looking like he belonged there, moving as if he had a purpose, until he could find a shadowy spot to hide. Luckily, there was nobody in that part of the building at this time – the musicians were gathering on the stage, getting ready for their rehearsal. Erik stood in the shadow, trying to think of the best way to get as close as possible to them. There would be corridors and passages backstage – theatres always needed a lot of extra spaces – but he didn't feel like climbing through this unfinished building. Something ground-level would do better.

Or below ground level.

He had to think quickly. If the building had a basement, it would be accessible from the back more likely than the front – the employees being the ones who needed it, not the guests. He was at the right place, then. It didn't take him long to find the small door to the basement, moving through the shadows with increasing urgency. Cigarettes don't take long to be smoked. Hurry. He found the door – it was next to the storage room where they kept the supplies from the tiny staff kitchen. He was just about starting to wonder what he could use to pick the lock when he realized the door was

not locked at all – there was nothing in there to steal yet. He entered the basement, going through the corridors.

There should be a passage that goes around the building, for pipes and heating. He would just have to find it.

Erik soon found the passage and entered it, pulling his scarf closer around his face. The place was dustier than the rest of the basement, so low that he had to walk uncomfortably crouched; and he could not afford to be found sneezing and coughing in the middle of this mess.

Finally, approximating the part of the corridor that should be under the stage, Erik carefully looked around for a small trapdoor in the ceiling, and sure enough, there it was. Opening it carefully, he found himself in a small space under the stage where actors and extras could spend their time waiting for their role – it was slightly dusty as well, but seeing as he was the only one there now, it would do. At least this one is a proper room, he thought, stretching his spine.

Erik realized he must have remembered their timetable wrong, or maybe they changed it – he had come here to hear the music academy's orchestra rehearsing their end-of-the-semester concert; but when he settled down, he realized he could only hear four distinct voices as they took out their instruments.

A string quartet. How did they get here? They don't exactly need a room this big to practice. They must be performing soon.

They sounded like friends; joking around and talking about life before they began tuning their instruments. Erik felt a pang of bitter envy as he heard them – they sounded almost like family, and they were all playing music together – well, almost all of them. The person at the first violin seat kept quiet as he tuned it and the rest of them talked.

„You alive, Jonsson?" one of the voices said. „Rough night?"

A male voice mumbled something in reply, with impressive annoyance.

„Alright then, let's begin."

As they started playing, Erik immediately realized how they got there – they were incredible, probably employed by either the academy or someone similar. They were skilled, very skilled, and seemed to care about what they were playing. Erik was just entertaining the possibility of actually buying a ticket and listening to these people when they performed at the concert when the first violin started playing.

As the first violin started his part, Erik felt a sudden strong desire to leave his hiding place and smack the man across the head. His talent was obvious, his technique was flawless – possibly the best of them all – but he had a sort of unmotivated laziness that people like Erik, having heard a lot of music, could hear very well; it was an affront to his ears and his entire being. The man was completely disinterested in what he was doing and could have very well been sawing through a piece of wood. Erik wondered who goddamn Jonsson was and what in the world Haydn must have done to him to make him butcher his work so cruelly. He was entirely sure that if he had the opportunity to practice with other people who cared about him on the stage, he would not have been so completely, unrepentantly ungrateful about it.

The music went on, four of them playing together and joking in the short pauses between playing. Jonsson woke up around the middle of the rehearsal, putting some effort into his playing and letting out a few truly remarkable minutes of beauty on his violin before retreating to his lazy bitterness. The others never commented on it; they talked to him with friendly concern as they invited him out for a beer with them after the rehearsal and he refused. As the musicians left, Erik wandered around the passages some more. Not all of the building was dusty and unfinished; some of the corridors were almost pleasant to be in. He considered waiting for everyone to leave so that he could explore the upper levels and the stage when he suddenly remembered.

I promised Alina I wouldn't take too long.

But he wanted to stay.

Maybe I'll come again with her.

It was a strange idea. Erik loved wandering around, exploring places he had no business being in – but he had always done it alone, and the thought of bringing her along – he couldn't predict what would happen. But he had promised to be safe, so he would keep that. He looked for a door, and found a small one that led him to the main hall in the front of the building – he got out quickly and sped through the front door, into the moonlit night.

ooo

He entered the house and immediately noticed Alina still up and reading in the kitchen.

„Oh. Good evening." He took off his coat and sat across from her. „You can't sleep?"

„I couldn't stop reading at the cliffhanger", she shrugged, closing the book and looking at him expectantly. „So, how's research?"

He smiled. „Great. I've been across town these days, and I've been watching the way this city enjoys its music."

„Huh?"

„I've been around several venues when they were having rehearsals, listened to some street musicians, snuck into... uh, visited the music academy and several schools."

„To what end?"

„I haven't decided yet, but", he swallowed, "You know, back in Paris, I used to listen to a lot of music. I... practically lived at Opera Garnier for a while, so I heard a lot of concerts and plays. I've missed it here."

"Oh, lovely!" Alina started, "do you-" she coughed and stopped herself. Her first impulse was to ask him if he wanted to go with her as she would have asked any of her friends; it was physically hard for her to constrain herself at his previous request.

Erik sighed very deeply, very aware of what she was going to say.

"As I was saying. I'd like to do that again, and I'd like you to come with me if you'd like."

"Of course, I would!" she beamed.

"Great. I had something in mind. Do you like Beethoven?"

"Yes! I think so."

„They're performing one of his concerts soon. I was thinking of going to one of the final rehearsals – there is one tomorrow. The venue will be open, but almost no one usually comes to the rehearsals. Not for an event this small. So we could sit somewhere in the back and nobody will – see me", he shrugged, „if you don't mind, that is."

ooo

Certainly enough, Alina was prepared to go the next day. She came home earlier than usual from work and was met with an empty house. Erik was still at the construction site, probably; he wouldn't expect her to be home so soon. Maybe that was for the better – Alina would have enough time to freshen up and get ready before he came home, and wouldn't be distracted. Not to mention, she had to admit, she would enjoy meeting him already in her dramatic evening gown.

Speaking of which, Alina had to find the bloody thing. She dug through her things; she wasn't entirely sure why she brought the dress with her to America – she only bought it because the salesman, back in London, told her she looked pretty in it.

It was, to be fair, a lovely dress – dark emerald green that complimented her skin, with black lace on the sleeves and little black flowers embroidered on the bodice. The cut of the dress was a little more daring than Alina was used to – it exposed her neck and collarbones, wrapping neatly around her shoulders and flowing into the simple, narrow sleeves and tight bodice. The skirt of the dress also had embroidery, and several ribbons flowing down

the length of it – most of them black, aside from one thin, silver one on each side. Alina liked the little silver threads; they matched the pins in her hair nicely. The dress was pretty enough to be special but simple enough for her to still feel like herself, Alina decided as she looked at her reflection in the window. She pulled her hair back in a loose bun, braiding the strands on the sides and affixing them in the back with pins. Her mother would sometimes pinch her cheeks to „give them a blush", and she wondered for a moment if that would ever actually work and if she should maybe try it when she heard the door open behind her.

Alina turned around, smiling delightedly as only a person who just put on their best clothes could, to face Erik entering the house.

„I'm ready to go!" she spun around.

He stood for a moment, unmoving, before seemingly remembering to close the door.

„I can see that, yes." He stood in front of her in slight embarrassment. „I'm afraid you might be wasting that dress because no one will see you. It's not a concert, just a rehearsal."

Alina frowned, taken aback by the comment. She suddenly felt a strong desire to cover herself.

„No one?" she crossed her arms in front of her.

„I planned to avoid people, yes. There are some secluded seats in the back."

She felt a very strong wave of frustration from somewhere deep in her spine flood over her head. „Yes, that was what you'd said", she raised an eyebrow. „I am aware."

Erik stood, looking at her in confusion. Alina suddenly realized how he felt in those moments when she would say something entirely clueless and he would start rubbing his temples slowly.

„Yes, because it's very often that I dress nicely to be seen by hordes of unfamiliar people", she said, still frowning with her arms crossed. „Once, last Easter, I even braided flowers in my hair. That certainly wasn't for you, you clueless... darling", she finished with a smile.

„You told me not to comment on it back then", he said.

„I'm not saying it now", she gritted through her teeth with a lot more annoyance than was appropriate for the situation.

„Wait", Erik held out his hand, sitting down. „is that really why you braided flowers in your hair last Easter?"

„No", she narrowed her eyes at him before turning around, pretending to look for her hat. She certainly wasn't going to change now, even if she was wasting this beautiful dress on a daft, clueless... darling.

„You're lying. Do you know where the flowers came from?" he asked, incredulous. „Did Yana tell you? Have you known all this time?"

She turned to face him again. „Sorry? I don't remember, exactly. They were on my desk when I came. I thought children put them in my pockets, they stuff a lot of things in my pockets all the time."

Erik brought up his hands to his face very slowly, rubbing the bridge of his nose over the mask. „I'm clueless, clearly." he looked at Alina, suddenly feeling very tired. He could understand how she felt when she would roll her eyes at him. „I put them there. That was me. Did you put daisies and violets in your hair, thinking that they magically appeared on your desk? For... for me?"

Alina stared at him. „But why?"

„Why? You mentioned your mother picking violets and daisies every Easter with you, and I bought some from a girl on the street, thinking it would make you happy. But then as I was leaving them on your desk I changed my mind, deciding it was a stupid idea. Then you came home and startled me,

and they fell out of my hands, all over the desk, everywhere. I had no time to pick them up, so I pretended I was never in there."

Alina stared at him for another moment, before bursting into very loud, very unladylike laughter that clashed with her delicate dress. „I'm- I'm sorry, I can't believe – oh dear, I can't – oh no." She gave a truly brave attempt to restrain herself for a second, before starting to snicker and burst into laughter again.

„Yes, it's very funny", Erik replied bitterly. „I'm horrible at doing something sweet for another human being."

„I'm not laughing at you", she straightened herself immediately after noticing his distress. „I'm laughing at myself because it honestly hadn't occurred to me until now that it could have been you. I spent that Easter wondering how I could make you pay more attention to me while braiding violets you", she swallowed another chuckle, „you left on my desk to make me happy. It is something special. And then I forbade you from saying anything because I thought you would laugh at me, or, or call me juvenile, or some other nonsense."

„If you could stop being so insufferable", he smirked, „I might even tell you what I wanted to say. If you're lifting the ban from me commenting on your appearance, that is." He looked at his watch and quickly stood up. „But after we leave. We might be late. Hurry."

Alina put on her coat, hat, and gloves with remarkable speed for once. She wrapped her arm around his, looking at him expectantly as he locked the house, and continued looking at him as they walked quickly toward the ferry to Manhattan.

Erik looked at her from the side. „Yes?"

„What, what, what did you want to say?" she smiled innocently.

He looked ahead. „I thought you looked beautiful."

„Ah." She beamed.

„As you do now", he nodded, smiling slightly.

„Heh." The smugness on Alina's face was almost impossible to bear.

„Even if you are extremely gullible and insufferable", he added, smiling slightly wider.

„There's nothing gullible about it", Alina shrugged. „The children left a lot of things in my pockets that year."

„Oh, some of that was me as well."

„Some of- " she turned to him, wide-eyed.

„The sawdust, yes. That was after we had that argument last March. You were snappy at me for two days straight. I couldn't stand it. I filled your pockets with sawdust while you weren't home."

Alina gaped. „It took me a week to get the sawdust out of my pockets, you-
„

„As I said, you are a perfect person to prank. Very gullible."

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Luckily, they wouldn't be late; both were very fast walkers and Erik knew the way to the small venue well enough already to get there on the first try. They entered the small empty hallway quietly and stood in the shadow. The receptionist was apparently on a break again. Erik liked this particular building and its owners' apparent naivete when it came to security; he caught himself wondering if they believed in ghosts.

He nodded his head toward a small, inconspicuous door to their right.

"That's the stairs to the basement. From there, you can take another corridor and end up behind the stage."

She looked at him. "How do you know?"

"I tried it out."

Alina raised her eyebrows. "Excuse me, you did what?"

"I came here once before and tried it out. I like this building, so I explored the corridors."

"Why?"

"Because", because it's fun, "because I was thinking of coming here to... I just like it here", he said. "It's a good place for musicians."

Alina gave him a very stern look beneath her dark eyebrows. Which was impressive, considering she was much shorter than him and had to raise her head significantly to look into his eyes.

"I, uh, was considering having Jack give them some of my compositions."

Her eyes widened. "Oh!"

"Don't stare at me."

She looked away quickly, turning around to look at her surroundings again. "So, you're saying we're here to see if you like this venue and the music they play, and if you do then you'll send them your compositions and we'll finally be able to hear them?"

"No, that's not what I'm saying. I haven't even decided if I'm sending anything yet, let alone to this particular-"

"Did you say that door-", she interrupted, "leads to the basement? And then behind the stage?"

"Yes."

"Would there be anyone there at this time?"

"In the basement or behind the stage?"

"Let me rephrase. Would there be any place that this corridor could lead us to, where there would be nobody else but we could hear them playing?"

He thought about it. "Maybe. There is a small wooden door that leads to the floor of the stage, just right next to the curtain, for... various theatrical purposes. When someone needs to jump out of nowhere in a play or hand something to the actors. But it's not needed for this performance, so it's most likely locked."

"And we can hear it from there? Through the door?"

"Certainly, it's important that the person waiting knows the right moment to go."

"Why are we still here then?"

Erik blinked.

"Oh, don't pretend this isn't what you were hoping for", she grinned at him. "Don't you want to sneak around dark corridors and listen to Beethoven?"

"Well, I always want to do that, but-"

"Let's go then!"

"It might be cold. And dusty. Probably uncomfortable."

"Yes, but it's also strictly forbidden, so that makes up for it", she said. "Lead on."

Erik shrugged, checking the theatre for accidental bystanders before getting to the door silently, Alina following behind him. He pushed the knob, but nothing happened.

"I'll need one of those", he pointed at her head.

"Excuse me?"

"One of your hairpins. I'll give it back."

Alina reached behind her head obediently, taking the silver pins out of her bun. Her hair fell as one smooth, dramatic waterfall down her back as she handed one to him.

Erik silently thanked the door for being locked.

„Right, then", he forced himself to look away and turned to the lock. „It'll only take a moment."

„Are you sure nobody will see us?" Alina turned around, feeling worried.

„Yes, I'm sure", he said. „Nobody is here at this time, I checked. I'd be in a lot more trouble than you if they caught us. There", he said, opening the door. He handed the pins back to her; Alina considered putting her hair back in a bun before changing her mind and putting them in her pocket for now. She followed him into the dark, narrow corridor.

„Oh", she whispered in surprise when the door closed behind them. „It's completely dark in here." She dug around the ripped-up pockets of her big coat before finding a box of matches and lighting one, holding it in front of her.

As it cast a dim light on Erik's masked face, she saw for a split second his eyes were wide with shock and anger before he plucked the match from her hand and swiftly took it out.

„What-„

„You can't just light a fire in a narrow space you know nothing about!" he hissed. And you can't just wave that flame in front of my goddamned face.

„You can't just snatch something right out of my hand!" she hissed back at the darkness.

„Yes, I can, if I have to! Don't do that again!"

She crossed her arms, silently offended.

„I can't see anything", she said after a few seconds.

„Good. We're not here to see anything, we're here to listen." He turned around, slowly walking through the corridor. He had no problem navigating the dark space; if he listened and felt around carefully, he could find his way around without a problem.

Alina obviously couldn't, because he heard stumbling and a whispered curse only a second later.

Erik stopped and sighed. „You're really bad at this."

The remark was awarded more offended silence.

„Do you need help?" he offered, trying to make his voice polite.

After a few more seconds of offended silence, Alina rolled her eyes and let out a quiet „Yes."

„Alright. Take my hand." He held out his hand to where she was, only to realize she was holding hers out in a slightly different direction. „Here. I'm here." He took her hand in his, feeling his annoyance mellow out when her warm skin touched his glove. „Follow me."

They walked silently for a while. Erik knew the approximate layout of the building – he could always imagine them quite well in his head after spending a little time inside – and he navigated them slowly through the dark, down and under the stage.

„It is pitch black", Alina thought out loud. „I can't see a thing. I can't even tell if you're wearing your mask or not."

He stopped dead in his tracks.

„I beg your pardon?"

„If you weren't wearing it, I wouldn't be able to tell", she shrugged, forgetting he couldn't see her.

„And that is relevant how?"

„I'm just thinking out loud while trusting you to lead me safely through this pitch-black corridor. Trusting you blindly, one might say. I hear trust is great when it's mutual. Hah."

She felt him tug on her hand as he started to walk again. At least I tried, she thought, better not push it too –

She didn't have a chance to finish that thought because a few steps later, she felt him stop again and put something soft and leathery in her free hand.

„Don't get too close to my head."

„I promise I won't", she smiled, forgetting again he couldn't see her, taking his hand to follow him further.

Erik led her through the dusty passages carefully until he found the spot – just under the stage, very close; so close that they would have to whisper. He would not have dared to stay here the night before, with only four musicians on the stage – but this little orchestra would be loud enough to muffle they're talking if they were careful.

Alina sat next to him, enjoying the music. As the concert progressed, Erik was silently attentive, noting the nuances of the performance. The orchestra was good – none of them as incredible as the string quartet he accidentally heard the night before, but none of them as abysmally annoying as the mysterious violinist Jonsson. Alina, free of the burden of knowledge when it came to music, simply sat and admired it, lost in thought. As she drifted off, she forgot about everything around her – the dark and cold corridor, the everyday worries that awaited her, the leather mask in her hand. The one thing she did remember was Erik breathing right next to her, and she automatically moved a bit closer until her shoulder touched his. Erik felt a tingle on his arm where they touched; he gave his best to keep silent and still and not to do something to disturb her and make her move again. The sensation distracted him at first but it melted in with the music, speeding up his heartbeat.

„Alina?"

„Yes?"

„I know I said I didn't want you too close to my head."

„Am I too close? I can move", she started getting up.

„No, wait", he stopped her. „Don't get up."

She sat back down, slightly confused. They sat in nervous silence for a few more minutes.

„I know what I said, but I'd still like to kiss you right now if that's alright."

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The musicians departed after the rehearsal with the speed that could be mustered only by people who were held at work for too long; they went out the door in minutes, chatting about the performance and who would go to drinks later. Erik and Alina waited patiently in the corridor until it was certain that nobody else would forget anything and come back.

Erik fumbled with the small door for a few minutes until it gave out. He lifted it above his head, propped himself up on his elbows, and climbed onto the stage, offering his hands for Alina to do the same. He pulled her up quickly, trying to be gentle, wondering how he got into this situation. What is the proper etiquette for committing petty crimes as a couple?

„This is a lovely theatre", Alina remarked, wandering around the stage. „It has... a soul, I suppose. I could imagine you performing here, even."

„I don't want that."

„It's alright", she turned around. „You can just send them your music if you don't want to be seen."

„I don't want to be seen", he swallowed, looking at the auditorium. „But I don't want to be invisible, either. Does that make sense?"

„Absolutely."

„I don't think I'd be able to handle it if I fail."

„You won't fail."

„I might."

„No", she waved her hands around her. „This is not success. Success is you pouring your heart into music purely for the sake of making the world more beautiful. Success is you going against shame, doubt, and uncertainty to show it to the world, and, it doesn't matter if it takes the world two days or two centuries to recognize or care about it. All art, all music, all that you carve from your own heart into something new is valuable, precious, and irreplaceable. It doesn't matter how well it fits into the audience's wishes. It doesn't matter how objectively good it is, because it's still valuable. It's the final scream you give into the world before you're nothing, and even if nobody hears it, it will still echo and maybe resonate with somebody someday."

Erik looked at her thoughtfully. „Do you believe this?"

„Yes. I have never been very artistic, and I know what my life's purpose is – I'm here to make the world a better place for the future. I will endure everything I have to for that goal. But you – you do things,
you create things because you can't help it. After all, they've always been within you and the only thing you can do is to let them out. You made music in a ship basement, you made music with one broken arm, you will make music with or without a giant stage because it's so deeply in you that you can't stop. Whatever happens on the outside – however people accept your music – that part will not change."

„I think that", he swallowed, „the most beautiful thing I can create is... it will still be me."

„So?"

„It might still be... twisted. Strange. Disturbing." he hesitated. „People might think it's ugly."

„Is that the point of music? To be pretty?"

„No."

„What is the point of music?"

„I... don't know", he said. „Depends who you ask."

„I'm asking you."

„The point is... to make me continue living?"

„Exactly", she waved her hands around again. „It's not music meant for people who want it to be pretty! It's music for people who want it to be important! To mean the world to somebody! It's the only kind of music you make, and if it's not always entertaining, so be it! Life is not always entertaining, and it's still always important!"

„Do you believe that?"

„Yes!"

„And what do you think about my music?" he asked quietly. He looked into her eyes, then at his feet, then at the auditorium again.

Alina looked at him in surprise. „I think it's beautiful."

„Is that the truth?" he kept looking at the auditorium. He felt uncomfortable with her staring at him, but for this one time, he thought it might be important if she did stare.

„Beautiful doesn't begin to describe it", she said, approaching him slowly to take his hand in hers. She turned towards the auditorium. „It's... I can't remember how my life was before I first heard you play Yana's violin. It seems boring now. I spent all my life making myself someone who would fit in and get what she wanted, but when I first heard you... something in me broke. Someone else came out I didn't quite recognize. I can't ever go back to that. Your music is objectively beautiful", she followed, „you must already know that. It's complex and layered, and your skill is amazing. You

know all these things by now. But beyond that, it's also beautiful on some level I can't quite describe."

She stood next to him, her arm around his, her last words echoing around the hall after she was finished talking. After a few moments, she thought she heard a quiet sob from his direction.

Erik sat down quietly on the stage floor, resting his forearms on his bended knees.

„I'll do it for you, then", he whispered.

She sat next to him, resting her head on his shoulder. „I'll be there to listen. Every time."

After a few minutes of silence, Erik rubbed his eyes and chuckled. „You'd make a good actress. You're great on stage."

A burst of loud laughter echoed through the building before being swiftly muffled by what sounded like someone's mouth being covered by a hand, followed by a very stern „shhhhh!".

Chapter 12:Confrontations

February 1894, Zagreb

One year ago

Zagreb was, for all intents and purposes, a capital that could hold its own compared to any other European city - or so the citizens told themselves, at least. In reality, the city was not so big, but it was currently going through something of a golden age; and like a young man that just reached the brink of adulthood, it was eager to prove itself. The city had running water, a tramway, a cathedral (one half forever under construction, but that was not relevant), a university, and many other things; it would soon get a brand new National Theatre. The fact that the outskirts were still very much rural and that taking a wrong turn at any given point meant one could get hopelessly stuck in a cornfield was also not that relevant.

The city itself was and had always been a very strange mixture of various influences; unlike some of its neighbors, it didn't have a clear architectural style – and as it grew bigger and bigger it only became more indecisive as to what it wanted to become. The turbulent history colored the city with Hungarian, Austrian, French, and even Ottoman details. It was enough to say that the more wealthy residents spoke several languages they were being taught from birth; just in case the government changes. The less wealthy spoke one language – Croatian – and over the past few decades, even the nobles started realizing it was a language one didn't need to be ashamed of.

It was a strange country to be born into, and both Alina and Amelija were very much aware of that even before they first started traveling across Europe as children. Alina's more lonely nights in London were spent craving traditional toys and sweets sold in the main market of her

hometown, the sound of traditional string instruments being played by villagers that came to the market to sell their wares; missing the view of the crowd and the city from their pretty residential house in the upper town.

Currently, in the aforementioned pretty residential house in the upper town, Amelija had to do her very best to stifle her laughter as she read her sister's letter.

Her parents stood next to her, arguing and panicking about the lack of better things to do. This was either a very strange prank, or Alina had jumped on a ship and fled to New York.

„Did you know about this, Amelija?" Her mother demanded, turning to her.

„I didn't", she replied truthfully. She was thankful to her stupid, annoying sister for at least not putting her in the position where she would have to either snitch or lie to their parents. It was clear what she would have done, and she didn't want to get kicked out of her house.

„Listen, Amelija, this is serious", her father pointed a strict finger at her. Unlike her sister, Amelija hasn't been afraid of her father since she was ten years old, but she put on a serious face and played along obediently.

„She's alone on the sea, with some... strange man, and God knows what might happen to her! I won't have my daughter live in those conditions! You have no idea what's out there!"

„You're right, tata", Amelija said. „It was stupid and reckless of her." And hilarious.

„We're getting her back", Mr. Boričević asserted. His wife nodded, equally furious.

„How will you do it, tata? The letter was clear. She's gone already." Amelija cast a glance at the letter sitting on her father's impressively old oak desk. „The date was in January, she's halfway across by now."

Her parents looked at her in silent fury for a moment.

„What is Antoinette Giry thinking, for God's sake", her mother continued, obviously worried out of her mind beneath all the anger. „Enabling Alina's fantasies is one thing, but she's put her in obvious danger this time! It's time I talked with her!"

Amelija shrugged again. „Perhaps. But lady Giry did send you the letter, didn't she?"

„So?"

„So it seems that Alina confides in her, and she'll know more about why she's decided to do this. And might even tell you, if you ask her nicely."

Another long silence spread across the room.

„I don't know what's out there, data, you're right. But Alina knows, she's spent the last seven years living alone and working with the lowest of the low", Amelija took a deep breath, „I think she was aware of what she was getting into."

„So you're defending her, now?"

„What? No, not, I think she's stupid." Liar. „But she's gone already. Do you intend to personally go to America, get her back by force, and then keep her here until the end of her life?"

„If I have to!" her father hissed, pointing his finger at her.

Amelija looked at him, sincerely hoping her annoyance wasn't showing.

Mr. Boričević sighed deeply, dragging his hand across his face.

„Ivan", her mother started. „If we do that, we might as well send her to the asylum for the rest of her life, because that's the only way we'll keep her here. If she doesn't drive us all insane together with her, judging by how it was before she left."

That was a fair point, and Amelija had to congratulate her mother for how reasonable that sounded.

„We can't just leave her there, Jelena", her father said, having calmed down a little. He rubbed his eyes, and Amelija noticed how old he seemed to look lately. „God knows what might happen to her."

„I think we should talk to lady Giry", Amelija said slowly. „She always seemed reasonable to me, and I happen to know she would tone down Alina's... impulses, most of the time. This is not typical for her, for all I know." Her parents listened to her closely. Amelija knew almost everything about Alina, which she rarely showed; it would come in handy right now.

Her mother looked at her, deep in thought. Amelija was cool-headed and lacked the temper their older daughter often displayed to their dismay; she was a clever and discreet young lady, and even if she rarely showed any initiative outright, things went her way suspiciously often.

„You should go talk to her", her mother said.

„I should?" Amelija was surprised. She was going to suggest the same thing, but after a lot of discussing and subtle hinting; it wasn't supposed to be this easy.

„Yes. Talk to Antoinette and find out what happened. Find out as much as you can about this trusted friend of hers, and the ship, and where they are going", Jelena said. „If we have to, we'll go to New York after her. But I'd rather not, or she might go to India next, and then we'll never find her."

„As you say, mama", Amelija nodded.

She excused herself and went back to her room, weighing her options. It would be more polite to write to Madame Giry first, but it might be more effective to simply show up at her doorstep before she might get the chance to think of a convincing story if that was her intention. It would be inconvenient for Amelija, however, to simply drop everything, pack up, and travel across Europe in the middle of winter. Aside from the obvious dangers of train travel and Croatian railroads not being extremely resistant to snow, Amelija had her studies and duties that she, as the only remaining daughter on this continent would have to take care of. Besides, it was unlikely that - whatever madame Giry told her - they could take any action

necessary before Alina writes from America. It would be best to write to Giry and ask to speak with her, and then trust in her judgment when it came to people's honesty and character. She pulled out a piece of paper and sat down by her desk to write a letter – formal, but friendly; written with politeness and respect in fluent French. Amelija knew French very well; it was the language of romance and diplomacy and both were things she was very fond of.

She would need some of that diplomacy in the following months, she knew that.

Amelija stared at her wall, deep in thought, thinking of the best way to phrase everything she wished to convey in the letter. Of course, she could just send a very honest telegraph saying I am worried out of my mind STOP where is my sister please talk to me STOP but the blunt force with which Alina normally smashed through life didn't suit Amelija very well. She could see from where she was sitting an obscene graffiti Alina wrote on her beautifully elaborate wallpaper several years ago when she came home for Christmas. Amelija retaliated by sending her a present for her birthday – a palm-sized box that looked like a jeweler's box, except filled to the brim with raisins. She wondered what was left of them by the time they reached London. Hopefully, they were impressively moldy.

She wondered if madame would even recognize her if she showed up at her doorstep. Her likeness to Alina was obvious – most notably in their straight nose, curved lips, and brown hair they inherited from their father; but Amelija had a drop of her mother in her – hazel-green eyes, small and curvy frame as opposed to Alina's tall lankiness, fuller cheeks compared to Alina's narrow, bony jaw. Not to mention I'm also prettier and better dressed, she smirked to herself. Amelija herself had a fantastic memory when it came to people, so she remembered Giry very well – at least the strict-looking, thin lady she was back then, with pale skin and blonde hair pulled into an impressively tight bun. But Giry hadn't seen Amelija since she was fourteen years old when Alina moved to London and the whole family went to help her settle in. They stopped in Paris to appease Alina's incessant begging to see „teta Giry" again, and Amelija saw her only for one day – most of which Madame spent with Alina anyway.

In the end, if Madame gets along with Alina so well, it might be a good idea to talk to her openly. She seemed like the type of person who would appreciate it. Amelija could sweet-talk her later on when she saw her face to face. She opened her ink and started writing.

Dear Madame,

I am writing to you because I trust your judgment and your intentions. My dear parents are desperate to know where my sister is and what made her do something so rash and extreme. I would like to speak with you when possible – for example, I could come to visit once Spring comes – and ease my mind. My parents are beside themselves with worry, but you need not worry about them after I've spoken to them and reassured them – they won't do anything rash. I would like to understand what happened and how I can help Alina in this situation. Whatever she finds important enough to do this for, I will find important as well.

With respect,

Amelija pl. Boricevic.

That would do. Amelija folded the letter neatly and put it in an envelope before realizing she didn't know madame's address. Surely, Alina would have some letters in her room? She could look for them; they'd have the information she needed – Amelija doubted the lady would have moved in the past few years. Alina would get mad at her for digging through her old things, but if she was so bothered by it, she was welcome to sail back and tell her that.

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February 1895, Coney Island

„Erik! Are you on the roof?" Alina called, leaning out of the kitchen window.

„No", a faint voice sounded from above. He knew it wouldn't stop her either way; and sure enough, a few moments later she appeared in front of the

house, looking up at him with her hands on her hips.

„What?" he asked.

Instead of responding, Alina went around the house, looking for the ladder. It was very subtly placed at the back – just a few wooden planks sticking out at strategic heights, enough to climb up if one was very careful.

„Please don't do that. I'll come down." Erik's eyes followed her nervously as she placed her foot on the lowest step.

„Too late", she grinned, grabbing at the roof to steady herself while she climbed. „I'll have you know I've climbed a lot of places people told me not to climb in my childhood, and I'm still alive. I've actually sort of missed it." She reached the roof, then carefully walked over to the top and sat next to him, smoothing her skirt. „This is easier than I remember it being."

„You're soberer than you were the last time you tried", he smiled.

„Sadly, I am. In any case, Jack is down there, he's looking for you", she turned to look ahead of her. „Oh, I can see the construction site from here!"

„Yes, those two are connected." He pointed his finger. „Do you see that? They've messed up the distance between these two buildings, and now it's going to be a problem. The Ferris wheel needs a lot of space not to be a hazard if there's a big crowd, and they didn't account for that. It was easier to dig at this spot because the ground is better", he pointed slightly to the left, „than at this one I specified in my blueprints. They wanted to save on foundations, and now they're having more expenses because they have to start this one all over."

„Ah. Jack did mention something like that. Is there no other way?"

„That's exactly what he's going to ask me when I come down, and no, there isn't. If there was, I would have put it there, but for some reason, all these people think they know better than me and now I don't want to be the one to tell him."

„Tell him what?"

„That they should have listened to me. I don't think he'll be very happy about it."

„Why didn't you explain it before? In the blueprints?" Alina asked.

Erik's tone was becoming slightly offended. „Should I have explained the why of every little thing I put there? How hard is it to simply follow my instructions as I wrote them?"

"Well, if they don't know the why, they don't know what's important and what's not."

"Everything is important." He turned to her, taken aback.

"Ah, so every single thing you wrote there is so self-evident that a worker who works there and knows the ground, the materials, and the men, could not possibly miss your arguments for putting something there that might inconvenience him for seemingly no reason?"

Erik stared at her in a way that for some reason reminded her of Walt. It's the disdain, I think.

"Have they not made some changes that turned out well?" she offered peacefully.

"They have", he admitted. "There were some things I could not have foreseen. Underground waters and such."

"I'd say this is just a problem of miscommunication", she shrugged. "You're not there, because you wish to be anonymous – don't look at me like that, I think that's a valid reason if you want it that way. But the price of that is that they don't know you and have no reason to trust your judgment more than their own unless you explicitly state your arguments. What you want is authority, and you can't get that unless you deserve it, or force it in some way. And I do recommend deserving it; force is generally hard to sustain – "

"I'm not going to force anything on anyone", he interrupted. "Are you done?"

"I am."

"Did Jack tell you to say this?"

"No, this is my advice." She smiled sharply. "Jack told me to tell you to stop hiding and face him like a man, but I find that chauvinistic and unconstructive -"

"Oh, I'll face him alright", he stood up. "Bold of him to act as if this is not his fault at least as much as mine", he walked quickly down the side of the roof and practically slid down the ladder.

Alina shook her head as he went around the house to enter through the front door. "I can't believe that part worked", she grumbled to herself.

"I have a very good hearing", she heard from below. "And yours was good advice as well."

Erik entered the house to see Jack sitting in their kitchen, sipping a cup of coffee.

"Erik!" he smiled pleasantly. "I'm so pleased you decided to join me."

"The only thing you can do is to start digging the foundations again at the place I specified", Erik rambled quickly, pacing around the room, "but if I can, I'll think of some way to utilize this spot so it's not a complete waste. I won't come to your construction site and I won't bother arguing with people, but I'll write you more detailed notes for important things in the blueprints from now on, so you can argue in my place if they want to change something that shouldn't be changed. Walter can't be there every day, the school year is passing quickly and he needs to focus on his homework, so you'll have to meet me here", he finished in a single breath and stopped in his tracks.

Jack looked at him, taking another sip of his coffee.

"And this is your fault as well as mine, so I don't appreciate the way you're talking to me right now", Erik added, crossing his arms.

"I have not said a single word, let alone blamed you for anything", Jack cocked his head to the side. "I just wanted you to stop avoiding me because it was driving me insane."

"And now I'm here. Is there anything else, or is this problem solved now?"

"Solved, for all I'm concerned", Jack shrugged. "What did you think would happen? That I would scold you like – "

Erik knew he would not like where that question was going and had no intention of letting Jack poke around his head for explanations for his behavior, so he was thankful when the door opened again and Alina entered the room. Otherwise, he would have had to get creative to get out of that conversation again.

"Hello, men", she grinned. "I'm afraid I'll have to leave you soon, I'm in a hurry. Erik, I will be late today. I have a parent meeting after classes."

"Oh", he turned to her. He noticed she was wearing her most stiff, conservative, authoritative dress; it was imposing but would have maybe worked better if strands of her hair weren't constantly escaping her bun to dance around her face.

"Wish me luck", she poured herself another cup of coffee and turned to them, leaning on the counter. "Walter's parents are coming today."

"Are they?" Jack asked. "How on earth did you accomplish that?"

"I suppose I just told them to stop hiding and face me, but in slightly better wording", she smiled into her coffee cup. "I have good news for them – Walter is progressing quickly, and as you discovered yourselves, has quite a talent for mathematics and physics. I'm afraid I'll soon be in over my head; he needs someone better to teach him those subjects."

"How will you do that?" Erik asked. "Do you have anyone at your school?"

"For now, yes. I'll transfer him to more advanced classes when it's time, and I'll explain to his tutors what he needs. He still gets defensive when he's asked to read and write too much", she shrugged. "But it's all good. What I want to see is how open his parents would be to let him continue his schooling after he's fourteen."

Erik and Jack shared an awkward look, before deciding simultaneously they'd prefer to look into their respective coffee cups.

"You don't know what will happen", Alina narrowed her eyes. "They might be reasonable."

"They might or might not", Jack broke the silence. "But even so, their idea of reasonable might not be the same as yours. I'm glad you're putting in so much effort, but – in the end, there is a possibility you might get disappointed, and it's not your fault, but keep it in mind."

Alina swirled the coffee grounds in her cup in an impressively dramatic, defeated silence.

"But", Erik added, casting a glance at Jack before turning to her, "there is a chance that you might not get disappointed, and even so, Walter will remember what you did for him. Even if you can't influence his parents, it's clear you're making a drastic change with him."

Alina nodded. "I'll keep it in mind. Their word is last, after all."

"Theoretically, that is very true", Jack winked, finishing his cup. "Practically, as long as you have their approval, you can keep making a decent man out of Walt, in or out of school. So just make sure you have their approval, either way."

Alina nodded once again, putting away her cup and putting on her coat. "I have to go now. You two, have a nice day. I'll see you in the evening", she smiled at Erik. He smiled back, almost reaching to kiss her when he remembered Jack was in the room as well. Something prevented him from acting like himself around that man; he had a gnawing, irrational thought at

the back of his head that if Jack saw it, he would laugh at him later. It was stupid, but he couldn't shake it off.

As Alina went through the door, Erik shot another glance at Jack, who was studying his fingers carefully. "You should go after her, she forgot some of her papers", Jack added politely.

"Alina!" she turned around in confusion, barely a few steps from the house. "You forgot something!" Erik walked quickly after her, papers in hand, and offered them to her.

"Huh? These? I don't need them today", Alina said as she sifted through them. They were her notes for yesterday's lessons; she thought Erik would know that, as they weren't with the rest of her current ones. Meanwhile, Erik looked around the street; it was early enough that he could see nobody around them.

"No, not these", he smiled as he pulled down her scarf with his finger and kissed her, holding her cheek with his other hand. "But take them anyway. Don't ask."

"Hah!" she laughed. "Alright. I almost left the house without the most important thing."

"Good luck with the Prestons", he said before running back inside.

"Thank you", Alina called back, feeling some of the stiffness in her shoulders loosen as she hurried to the school.

ooo

"Good afternoon", said the small, timid woman in front of Alina's office when she opened the door. She looked much older than Alina, but it seemed to her like she might cry if Alina raised her voice at her.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Preston. Please come in", she gestured politely. The woman obediently came in, shifting uncomfortably and looking around the room. Alina closed the door with more gentleness than was usual for her.

"My husband can't come", Mrs. Preston hurried as Alina looked at her. "He's at work, but I'll tell him everything you said."

Alina nodded. "Please, sit down", she said, lowering herself in her chair. This was inconvenient, not to mention probably a lie. Alina was not such a rookie to schedule a parent-teacher meeting before asking Walt when his parents worked; but confronting his mother about it would have meant giving away her source of information, so she was going to play along for now.

The problem was that this tiny lady was much less likely to persuade her husband in anything than Alina would be if he came himself; she didn't look particularly assertive, and from what Alina knew about old Preston he was probably very domineering and manipulative. Alina would have to coerce him somehow into visiting her personally. Should I lay out a red carpet for you to take interest in your son, sir? God, I hate these games.

"Would you like some cookies, Mrs. Preston? It's an old Russian recipe. Very sweet", she slid the small bowl across the desk and smiled at Mrs. Preston sweetly, hoping she would stop looking like she was expecting to be shouted at any second now.

"No, thank you", Mrs. Preston shook her head.

"Alright, I'll just leave them here if you change your mind. So, you're here about Walter", she leaned forward in her chair, crossing her fingers and remembering the speech she had prepared.

"I hope you can understand", the woman began, "he's a lively boy. He means well, really, he just-"

Alina blinked in confusion. "What?" She didn't even realize until later that she interrupted the woman mid-sentence. Respect. Remember respect. You can be rude to her husband if he pisses you off, but this lady desperately needs some respect in her life.

"I haven't had any problem with Walter", Alina continued. "That is not why I called you."

"Oh." Mrs. Preston relaxed slightly. "Good."

"I called you here about his grades", Alina opened a drawer in her desk and took out Walter's tests and assignments. "They are improving. Walter had... vision problems, so to speak, that made it very hard to read and write. But he has been practicing, and it's improving slowly", she passed the papers. She made a note not to include Walter's little poem from December. The woman took them and looked them over, holding them close to her face. Oh. Walt mentioned her being nearsighted. Probably doesn't help her confidence, but it seems that she can read at least. "See? Even his handwriting is becoming slightly easier to read. He'll always struggle with it to some degree, but if you ask him to explain his lessons, it's very clear he knows them very well", she added.

"I noticed he's getting better", the woman said, focusing on the papers. Alina noticed the fearful tone in her voice getting less prominent. "He's always been the smartest among his siblings. I never understood why he couldn't read, I tried to teach them all when they were little and he was the only one who hated it." She looked up at Alina, her insecurity seeping back into her eyes.

"You taught your children to read?" Alina asked gently. "That's admirable. You're a wonderful role model." Well, not entirely, but who cares? Don't quote me to your daughters, lady, please.

"We can't afford to send them all to school", the lady said, straightening up slightly. "Our two oldest sons are working, but Walt is still young, and he's smart, so it made sense to keep him in school longer", she finished, before remembering herself and adding, "my husband thought it was a good idea. At least it occupied him, and you never know when you might need someone schooled in the family, he said."

Alina was sure it wasn't her husband's idea but her own carefully suggested and hinted until he came to that conclusion himself. She wasn't going to let it show, but she was starting to think this woman might be of some help after all.

"That is exactly what I wanted to talk about", Alina smiled. "Walter is clever and promising. I would like him to continue his education after he's finished with this school, that is."

Mrs. Preston's eyes widened, but not with the good kind of surprise. "I – I don't – "

"He's progressing rapidly, and if my impression is correct, he'll be quite advanced in mathematics and physics. He could be an engineer one day", she smiled again.

"I don't know if that would be possible."

"Why not?" Alina relaxed in her chair. "This school is part of a larger community project, funded by several benefactors. It's not hard for me to arrange a scholarship for Walt if he proves himself to my superiors. He would be completely provided for."

"Would he still be with us?" the woman looked at her sharply.

"Living with you? I haven't thought of it yet", Alina admitted. "I can't see why not?"

"I'm afraid I can't make that decision on my own", Mrs. Preston cast her eyes down, looking at the table. You mean you're not allowed to, Alina thought to herself.

"My husband will have to decide."

"Understandable", Alina nodded. "There is plenty of time to decide in any case, and I would very much like to talk to your husband. I have already written several reports about Walter to the principal and several competent teachers I know. For however long he's here, I'll make sure he gets the best possible education."

"What do you mean?"

"He'll get some special advanced lessons in mathematics and physics, as he seems to enjoy them very much", Alina said. "I'm not equipped to teach him

that. It's free of charge, part of our program – my program – for gifted children. I've put in a good word for him. When he leaves this school, if you decide to educate him further, he'll be as prepared as any other child from any good school", she finished proudly.

"Oh", Mrs. Preston whispered fearfully. "I… thank you, but that might not be necessary."

"This is simply a program that exists in this school, by no means an obligation for you. Either way, I'm not eager to have him in classes that bore him, since as you said, he's a lively boy." Alina smiled. Lively was a generous description. Walter, for all his progress and the apparent friendship he felt for Alina, was an absolute nuisance when he was left to sit still and listen to something he knew already.

"I'll talk to my husband", Mrs. Preston said, not looking assured at all. "He's the head of the house, and it's his decision. Walter will probably work at the factory with him once he's fourteen. It was the plan all along."

"Understood", Alina nodded again. "Still, I'd like to meet Mr. Preston. Perhaps he would be proud to hear how well his son is doing in school."

The small lady nodded, awkward silence falling around them.

"That was all I wanted to say", Alina concluded. "Do you have any questions for me, Mrs. Preston? Anything you'd like to discuss?"

"No." she looked eager to get out of there.

"Then that's it", she offered her hand to Mrs. Preston, who shook it feebly. "It was lovely meeting you, madam. You have a very clever and interesting son."

"Thank you", Mrs. Preston said standing up. Alina led her out of the room, opened the door politely, and let her out.

That wasn't so bad.

Poor woman.

Well, I hope I get to talk to that man sometime soon. Meanwhile, I should stay here a while longer in case she comes back. I have some letters to write.

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About half an hour after Alina had scheduled her parent meeting, Erik decided he might drop by the school and walk home with her. He had been somewhat busy lately and Alina didn't have a clear schedule anyway – but he had a feeling she might appreciate it after what would probably be a stressful talk. Not to mention he didn't want to count on the good behavior of the man who was probably the reason behind the bruises on Walter he would occasionally get a glance of.

Standing in the shadow near the school, Erik noticed that everyone was slowly leaving again; he even saw Dowling walk out slowly and solemnly. Alina was still inside, apparently riddled with work. She must have been very burdened with all that was going on; he noticed she found it hard to leave work late and often talked about it when she was home or stared at some distant point in the wall with a worried look on her face.

Maybe she simply hates coming home, because you're there.

Ah, that's a wonderful thought indeed, thank you. Erik shook his head slightly. How lovely it is to have a mind that hates itself.

Some man, annoyed-looking with eyes suspiciously similar to Walter's, walked up to the school and waited. The little woman he was waiting for came out barely ten minutes after he arrived, but he still managed to look as if he was already losing his patience. The woman walked up to him, apologized after his snarky comments, and quietly explained something to him.

"Hah! She can sell that shit to somebody else. It's not happening", he snorted.

The woman kept talking more quickly, growing more upset.

"She did what now?" he raised his voice. The woman tried to calm him down, raising her hands, and explained some more.

"Don't you tell me to calm down! That's some nerve you women got, doing it behind my back!"

She quietly remarked on something, looking annoyed, but it only poured more oil on the fire.

"Well, I couldn't come! You could have gone another time! Or told that idiot to mind her own business!"

The woman seemingly begged him to be reasonable.

"I don't care! This is all a bunch of nonsense from some snot-nosed little teacher, and if you're going to stand by and watch them dictate what happens to my son, I won't! I'll tell her myself!"

Erik saw the man stomping into the school and immediately knew what he had to do. He went behind and around the building, keeping to the shadows until he found a particular window on the ground floor with a familiar figure inside.

Alina jumped slightly when she heard a soft tapping on the window glass and turned to see him waving at her. She hurried to the window, opening it quickly.

"Erik!" she hissed. "What are you doing? I'm not done wo-"

"Yes, I'm aware. I need you to trust me for exactly one minute, and you'll see. Can I come in?"

She stepped to the side, confused. Erik stepped on the window and jumped over, quickly and soundlessly, before pacing across the room. Alina closed the window and looked after him, completely confused. He could hear a faint sound of approaching footsteps and someone talking and arguing as he leaned on the door, resting his hand on the knob. To be fair, the man wasn't shouting – he wasn't that bold yet in his anger to cause a scene in the

school, but Erik had a sharp hearing and could make out a fair deal of what was being said. He waited for one, two, three, or four seconds before swinging the door open directly in front of Mr. Preston's face –

"I want to talk to that bitch! Some nerve she's got, minding our business-" he stopped dead in his tracks as the door swung loudly about a finger's length from his nose, stopping just before it slammed into the wall.

Erik stood with one hand on the doorknob and the other on the frame, looking at him silently for a second as his last words echoed around them. His wife, as well as some miserable-looking woman – probably Walter's former teacher, stood next to him helplessly looking like they were on the verge of tears.

"Pardon me, sir", he said quietly, standing a little too close to Preston with the politest smile he could manage, "are you asking for me, or my business partner?" he gestured chivalrously at Alina, who watched the scene in shock.

Preston was a good twenty centimeters shorter than him, and he seemed very aware of it as he stared at him. Erik waited, still smiling sweetly.

"I want to talk to my son's teacher, about a justified complaint", Preston straightened up.

"That would be my business partner, then. Though these days she is more often called 'Miss Boričević', and less often 'that bitch'", he bowed his head slightly, still not letting go of the doorknob. He looked the man directly in the eye the whole time.

Preston's face drained of color, but he kept stubbornly silent. Ah. That kind of man. Well. It seems I will be staying here for a little longer, Erik turned to Alina. "Miss Boričević. Do you have a meeting with this man today?"

She gathered herself immediately and nodded. "Yes. Would you kindly let him in?"

"As you wish, miss", he flashed one quick, wide grin her way - Alina did her best to keep a straight, strict face, but one corner of her mouth twitched slightly upwards - before he turned to Preston again. "It seems you're at the right place, despite having gotten the wrong name. Please, come in", he moved to the side for Preston and his wife to pass next to him. They both looked like they would rather disappear, as they slid as far away from him as possible. Alina shook her head reassuringly at the teacher, and she left without a word, looking positively relieved.

"We'll continue the meeting later, miss. I'll wait outside until you're finished", Erik smiled at Alina, not looking at Preston – he could see him sweating in his peripheral vision – and closed the door behind him in one swift motion. Alina looked after him as if she wasn't entirely sure if she wanted to kiss him or kill him.

"Wonderful to have you here, sir", Alina smiled, turning to Preston after Erik left. "I was hoping to meet Walt's father! Please, sit down." She gestured politely and walked over to her chair to sit.

"No need", Preston crossed his arms. "I'll be quick."

"Very well, I agree", Alina took over before he could take another breath, "I had simply called you here to show you your son's progress. He's a talented young man, and he's doing remarkably well, especially in some classes."

"Yeah right", Preston scoffed. "You have some imagination, miss. Walt is a dumbass; he's always been a dumbass like his father before him and I'm fine with it. Don't sell me these flowery fairytales. He can't even read."

Ah. A lot of things are clearer now. Alina kept smiling but her eyes lost the friendly spark, leaving two dark stone cliffs. "I have never let anyone in this school call Walter a dumbass, and I don't intend to start now. He's been transferred to some advanced classes recently, and I doubt he'll have any problems with them, judging by the speed of his progress."

"What's all this about different classes? Where are you sending him?" Preston demanded. "I didn't agree with anything."

"Not exactly sending, sir", Alina replied politely. "He's still here. Our school is still fairly new, so this is an experimental program, but children after the age of ten can attend a combination of classes that suits their capacities and interests. I have merely written a recommendation for Walter's program; I assure you it was approved by higher instances." Technically, Preston could demand to have him sent back to easier levels, but she wasn't going to tell him that unless he specifically asked her. "Including Mr. Dowling, the principal", she nodded politely. Dowling, to be fair, would have signed anything she sent him in the past month. He was so relieved by having Walter occupied for a change that he even stopped breathing at her neck and frowning at her in the hallways.

"Yeah, yeah, Anna told me", Preston waved his hand dismissively. Luckily, Alina had guessed correctly that he wouldn't be so brave to keep arguing once the principal was mentioned. Alina noticed that Anna - Mrs. Preston - had not attempted to say a single word since he entered. "And she told me you want to send him to another school when he's fourteen."

"That is entirely up to you, sir", she smiled innocently. "I am simply ensuring that he has the best possible education he could have. Your wife has told me you were the one who decided to keep Walter in school longer; I am respecting your opinion that it is useful to have him educated well now that he's here."

"Not gonna happen", Preston snapped. "He's not going anywhere. We can't afford to feed a useless family member while he's off messing around in some college. I'll allow this for now, but he'll find honest work after he's done with this school, as I did and as his brothers did. And that's final."

"Very well, sir", she nodded. "Should you change your mind, there are still two years left until that decision. Until then, Walter will be well cared for while he's with us."

"I ain't changing my mind, and I can take care of him myself", Preston raised his voice. "I don't need your -"

Alina heard a loud thump at the window as a snowball flew over seemingly out of nowhere and hit it hard, but without causing any damage. Preston

shook and turned to look at the window, forgetting what he was about to say. Alina had to try hard not to snicker as the snowball slid very slowly and dramatically down the glass.

"Pardon me, sir, the younger kids get carried away sometimes", she said cheerfully. "One second, I'll warn them."

She walked up to the window - she could see nobody out there, of course, but she still opened it and leaned out, looking down.

"You should be more careful, darling", she said sternly. "Please come see me after I'm finished with this meeting."

Erik grinned at her, huddled beneath the window, and saluted.

"That should be taken care of", she closed the window decisively and turned back to the Prestons.

"Sir, I am very pleased to have met you. You have a very clever and promising son, and I trust that you will do what is best for him", she said. I'm getting better at lying. Is it Jack's influence? "Do you have any more questions for me?"

"No. I'm done", Preston turned abruptly, his wife following immediately behind him. "Stick to your duties from now on, Miss Borovich", he emphasized with obvious disdain.

"It's Boreechevich, sir", she smiled. "And I will, thank you." And if my duties should include putting you in jail once I have proof Walt's being abused, well, so be it. She stood up, but before she could open the door for them, Preston had already opened it himself and promptly left, his wife following behind him. Mrs. Preston had not looked Alina in the eyes through the whole ordeal, and as Preston left through the door she only cast one quick apologetic glance her way.

Alina opened the door for the Prestons to leave and peeked outside her office window after their footsteps grew fainter. "I will be right out, business partner", she said. "We can go then." Erik silently waited for her to

get ready and lock her office, slightly surprised when she hopped out through her window, letting it slam behind her. He caught her awkwardly by her waist and quickly put her down.

"What did the Prestons say?"

"Nothing good, but I anticipated this", Alina said, pushing the stray strands of hair back under her hat. "It's an offer too unimaginable for them to react well to it. I wanted to plant a seed of thought in them for now, and that's what I did. Hank Preston is loud and annoying and tiresome, but I feel like he hasn't got all the strings in his hands as he likes to think, so I've still got hope. In any case, they'll keep Walt here until he's fourteen, so I've got plenty of time to work on it."

"I'm glad it went well."

"This is the most fun I've ever had at a parent-teacher meeting", she admitted.

Erik smiled. "You're not worried I'll undermine your authority?"

"I am. Singling me out among other teachers may make them resent me, and then I'm in trouble", she shrugged. "I have dealt with more than one screaming fool in my life so far. I can handle it. He's not going to attack a teacher in her workplace; he's not that stupid. It would have ended him."

"Sorry", he mumbled into his collar.

"Don't apologize", she waved her hands. "You calmed down a crisis today, and I'm thankful for it. But I think it's better for my reputation if you don't give me any kind of special treatment for being your business partner."

"I wasn't going to let him talk to you like that", he snapped in annoyance. "Special treatment would have been if you accepted a higher position than just a teacher or if you let me get you better classes -" she shot him a glance that cut him off immediately. Alina had not been very happy upon finding out he had pressured the higher-ups to give her the more obedient children; it caused an entire argument among them last month that resulted in them

not speaking with each other for three days - well, it was Erik who didn't speak to her, to be honest. Alina simply stated her disappointment in an icy, terrifying voice and refused to back down until he promised he would never try to push her career behind her back again. It was for nothing, on top of it all, because she seemed to be naturally drawn to the naughty children and simply collected them spontaneously as the school year progressed. He had realized then he had never seen her so angry with him before that fight.

"I'm not trying to further your career", he hurried. "I'm trying to protect you, and that's something else entirely. I respect your choices, I do. But I heard Preston outside yelling at his wife, and I saw the way she winces and cowers around him, and there is nothing I can do about her. But if he so much lays a finger on you, I will find the highest tree on this island, tie him to it, and then chop them both until I get pieces small enough to make toothpicks. You can be mad at me after that, but I'm not letting him harm you."

"Why the tallest tree?" Alina asked with amusement.

"To make him wait", Erik said in a carefree voice as he scratched one of his wrists absentmindedly. "Anticipation of pain is half the torment."

Alina was smart enough not to ask him where that came from. "Ah. Clever", she shook her head, getting serious again. "Do you think he would have assaulted me?"

"A school teacher on school grounds? No, you said it yourself, he's not that stupid", Erik waved his hand, "but men like him sometimes get funny ideas, and I wanted to prevent them before they had a chance to develop."

"I have to admit, it was highly effective", she turned to him. He saw the corner of her mouth twitching again. "You calmed him right down. I didn't know you could be so terrifying."

"I have never tried to scare you on purpose. I don't want you to fear me at all", he said, biting his tongue not to add I would like you to love me. Maybe. If it's not too much trouble.

"No, I'm not scared of you. It was highly amusing. Charming, even. ", she said, looking dreamily into the sky. "Lord, I'm tired."

"I have noticed you find it hard to leave work lately", he said casually.

"Ah... Yes. I do overexert myself when I have some pressing issue going on." She paused. "Do you mind?"

He ignored the question for now. "Have you always been like this?"

Alina thought about it for a second. "From what I can recall, yes."

"Didn't take you for much of a perfectionist", he shrugged. It takes one to know one.

"It's not perfectionism", Alina admitted. "It's a very basic feeling of worry. I find it hard to leave a place where something goes on that worries me, because I'm afraid everything will crash and burn while I'm gone. I work too much in general, yes, but when I'm worried I'll put in extra effort to check everything."

"Hm."

"It's probably not a very healthy habit, is it?"

"I'm not an expert." My motivation for coming here was the same, which would confirm that it's not very healthy.

"Do you mind?" she repeated.

"It's your job, it means everything to you. I wouldn't ever take that away from you. I'd hate it if somebody tried to limit what I do with my time and interests –"

"So you do mind", she raised her eyebrow, smiling slightly.

"Maybe the littlest bit."

"Why not just say it?"

"I don't know." He stared at the road ahead, seething silently. Because I just saw a great example of what I don't want to become. I'd rather suffer in silence than become Hank goddamn Preston.

"You can tell me if something bothers you."

"I don't know how", he admitted. That's not surprising, Alina thought. People who have been controlled and abused, in my experience, rarely know the difference between standing up for themselves and being needlessly aggressive.

"Hmm. Can we reach a compromise, maybe? What would be a good solution to this?" she thought out loud, looking at the road. "It's past six already, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I could have been home before six", she shook her head. "I'll try to make a plan every morning for when I should be able to come home. I won't let myself go over that time unless it's an absolute emergency."

"Oh", he blinked in surprise. "That's not such a bad idea."

"If I break my word, you have the right to be mad at me, and I'll think of something to make it up to you", she offered.

Erik turned to her in amusement. "No, I'll think of something for you to make it up to me. And I'll be very petty, just so you know."

"Honestly, I'll be very disappointed if you don't do your absolute pettiest worst", she grinned.

Chapter 13:Violence

„In any case, that's all done now. We've made new foundations, and it'll be done by May – „ Jack stopped suddenly – he saw that Erik, listening intently until that moment, suddenly froze in place and looked around. Jack looked as well, but could see nothing; the street was coated in early evening darkness that still lingered even in late February. He couldn't hear anything, or at least he thought so.

Suddenly, he did hear something, but a moment too late – a small boy jumped from around the brick wall corner of the nearest building, running for dear life with his hands covering his face and bumping full force straight into Erik. He, taken by surprise by having recognized the small figure, couldn't decide if the proper course of action was to dodge him or stop him so he stood there as the boy collided into his stomach, pushing the air out of his lungs. Oh, I remember which ribs were broken now. His hands balled up into fists, but he stopped himself before he swung at anything.

The boy jumped back, his already tear-smudged face stricken with fear, and opened his mouth to apologize when he recognized him as well.

„Walter", Erik said, softening his voice when he saw Walter's face. „What happened?"

Walter stood there in shock for another second before starting to run again, pushing past them and storming off behind another corner and into the night. Erik nearly ran after him when he felt a hand tug on his sleeve. He turned furiously.

„Not a good idea", Jack said.

„He's –„

„Yes, I saw. "

„Let me go right now. "

Jack knew that tone of voice, so he released his sleeve immediately and raised his hands calmly. „I'm saying, you'll scare him even more if you run after him now."

Erik looked at the dark street where Walt had gone. „I'm supposed to go home and tell Alina that I saw her student, crying with his face battered into pulp, and just let him go into the night?"

„Definitely, yes. She will know what to do better than you or I." Jack sighed, realizing work was done for today. „Let's go tell her."

„I have a better idea", Erik cast a side glance at Jack. „You go and tell Alina what happened, and I'll find Walt."

„He's far away by now. Do you know where to find him?"

„Yes, of course, I do", Erik threw his hands impatiently. „He's scared out of his mind, he'll go somewhere he feels safe. Go tell Alina. I'll meet her at home when I see what's going on. Tell her to find some medical supplies, I can't tell if his nose is broken."

„And his own home? Wouldn't they want to take care of it themselves?"

„If that's the case, I'll personally take him there. But something tells me home is where he's running from." He chewed on his lip nervously. „You know Walter by now. He's not so insane to pick a fight this seriously. "

„Not that we know of."

„Yes, sure", he waved his hand impatiently. „I'm going now. Tell Alina to be ready." He sped up, running lightly through the street. Jack sighed behind him, turning toward their house. This might be a long night, he realized. I can't leave a beaten kid either, let alone in the hands of my own well-meaning, impulsive children.

ooo

Walt wasn't hard to find; Erik never asked much about him but it wasn't hard to figure out that the places he felt safe were the school and the construction site where he occasionally ran easy errands for him. There might be some more, such as the patisserie where Alina took him a few months ago, but it wouldn't be the first place he'd look. The most obvious place is where there would be no people at this time. There still might be kids playing outside of the school, but the construction site gets locked once the workers go home.

He arrived at the site fairly quickly and found a place in the shadows to think. It's not enough to find him; I have to think of what to say to him after. What would Alina do?

Cry, probably, among other things.

Well, that might not work, since the kid already seems frightened and ashamed enough. Surely she would find something to say to calm him down. He can't be the first kid she's seen in this situation.

She would probably comfort him and assure him that everything will be fine. Sadly, that only works because she believes it, and I can't honestly say that I do. Nothing will probably be fine with this kid. His life is a horrible mess; I have no idea how to help him and no idea why I even want to.

Improvisation is, then.

Walter wasn't so dumb to just sit on the street and wait to be found, but luckily Erik was a better listener than he seemed to be. He climbed over the fence and slowly went toward the Ferris wheel. Walter was trying to be silent, but Erik knew what people's breathing sounded like after they were crying - he looked up for a bit, then climbed over the heavy metal rods and sat a few meters away from the seat under which Walt was hiding.

„Hello, Walt." He looked ahead of him, seeing the kid shift slightly in his peripheral vision.

„Hey, mister Demon. What do you want?"

„Nothing. I'm enjoying this evening in peace. I like being around abandoned places."

„Why?"

„Silence helps me think. I don't like people."

„Well, you'll have to find another place, then."

Screw you too, kid. Erik tried to think of an appropriate response to that, but having found none, he simply sat there in silence hoping Walt wouldn't just bolt again. But Walt remained curled up under the seat, staring straight ahead with obvious distress. Erik noticed he was breathing through his mouth.

„Can you teach me how to fight?" Walter said after what seemed like an eternity.

„Pardon me?"

„I want to learn how to fight. I overheard some guys from across the island say they jumped some masked man last summer, and he beat them something terrible."

„Uh..." Erik blinked a few times, taken aback. „I did?"

„That's what they said. One of them had a split brow, and one was limping."

„Oh. Good. Sadly, I didn't win that one", he said. „I spent a week in bed after that. I'm not a good person to learn fighting from, it seems."

„There were five of them, and they said you would've killed them if they didn't have a bat."

„See, that's the problem", Erik lost his composure and started rambling impatiently. „I can't teach you how to fight, because I don't know how to fight. I know how to black out and try to kill somebody, which is not

something I exactly learned on purpose, and now I'm trying hard to unlearn it. It's not the kind of person I want to be, and it's not the kind of person I want you to become because of me."

„You want me to be a good boy who doesn't fight?" Erik had never heard the phrase „good boy" uttered with that much vitriol.

„I want you to learn some other way to solve your problems, yes." I want to learn that too.

„And how am I going to do that?" Walter raised his voice. „You think I want to be like this? I'd very much like to be a good boy and not be like – like my old man, but I have to do something or he'll kill me or my mom one of these days! I don't care if I have to become an asshole if it means it'll stop!"

„So, you tried to fight him back? Defend your mother?"

Walter didn't answer, but Erik was quite sure he started crying again. It made him extremely uncomfortable, but after a moment's hesitation, he leaned from his seat on the rails and jumped quietly onto the platform where Walt was, sitting on the floor across from him.

„That was a brave thing to do", he said quietly, studying his hand. „I've met your father. Unfortunately, you will always lose these fights, because he will always be a bigger asshole than you. You don't have it in you to harm him, and he does."

„Oh, screw you", Walt sobbed. „If you're not gonna help me, just get the hell away from me."

„I am going to help you if you let me", Erik said, fiddling with his glove, then the cuff of his shirt, then his glove again. After some more hesitation, he did something he'd only done in front of two people since he arrived here – Alina and Yana – and pushed back his sleeves, leaning his elbows on his legs as he turned to Walter again. Neither of them commented on it, but Erik could see Walter's eyes widening in shock. „I was once in a similar situation, and I frankly don't know what I would have done if one brave

woman hadn't pulled me out. I still don't know the right thing to do. I'd want to kill your father if I was you. I'd want it. But I'd be lying if I told you that helped me. Only other people, who knew how to do things other than fighting, hurting, and killing, could pull me out. And that's the only thing I can honestly offer you."

Walter blinked, still unsure, staring at his forearms. Goddammit, kid, you're old enough to be subtle, aren't you? I'm well aware of how mutilated they are. It was a small price to pay to shield my eyes and ears from the whip.

„The closest person like that I know is Alina, and I know she's your teacher", he raised his hand when Walter tried to interrupt, „but I knew her before she was a teacher. She'll keep your secrets. She won't do anything you don't let her do. I can honestly promise you that, from my own experience." He pointed at Walter's face. „She probably doesn't know how to set your nose right, but luckily I do. But we'll need some help, which is why I'd like you to come with me."

„I want to stay here", Walt mumbled.

„We can do that as well", Erik shrugged. „But I'm not moving either, and I assure you I'm much better company when she's around. It's probably from all the sweets she keeps in the house."

Walter sat in stubborn silence.

Alright, Walter, I can wait. It's quite cold, and you're quite small. I'm sure you don't have the patience of someone who spent nine years in a cage.

After what seemed to Erik as about fifteen to twenty minutes – just long enough to prove a point – Walter dragged himself from under the seat and stood up. In the pale moonlight, his injuries looked a lot worse than half an hour ago – his nose was swelling with bloody trails coming out of his nostrils down his mouth, and his eye was black and blue. Erik wondered how much worse the rest of the kid's body was. He wasn't normally one to feel sorry for strangers, but looking at this angry, starved, beaten kid in an oversized jacket he felt a sudden flash of fury. I wish I'd slammed that door

right into Preston's face back when I had the chance. I would have done the world a favor.

„Fine", Walter stretched a little, then winced. „Ow. Let's go."

„Good", Erik grabbed the railing to jump down. „Remind me to take you here again sometime when it's finished."

ooo

Jack must have told Alina beforehand what to expect because when Erik opened the door with Walt behind him her face showed hardly any shock.

„Come in", she stood abruptly from her seat. Jack sat across from her, his forehead wrinkled with worry. Surprisingly, Yana was there too – how did that happen? She was leaning over the stove, cooking what seemed to Erik like some kind of soup. Pjotr, calm and silent for a change, played by her feet. This might not be a good idea, with so many people around. He's going to run, I barely got him to talk to me –

Alina kneeled on the floor next to Walt, hugging him gently. „Walter, I heard you were hurt. I'm so glad you're alright."

„I – „ he fumbled in panic, his eyes darting over to Erik. I'm sorry! I don't know what's happening either!

„We can talk about what happened later after we take care of you. This looks like it hurts. Come here", she tapped his shoulder lightly and led him to the only free chair. „As you can see, we were all very worried about you. Jack and Yana – you know them, right? – they came by to see if they could help. Is that alright? They won't stay long." It was a deliberate move on Alina's part, actually, and she was waiting for Erik to catch on, judging by the panicked looks he cast at Walter. The child is used to having a big family, darling. Having several people who worry about him is going to calm him down, even if he's unaware of it.

„Whatever", Walter shrugged. „Does anybody know how to fix my nose?"

„I do, I told you", Erik took off his gloves. „but it's going to hurt for a bit."

„It hurts already."

„Oh, I bet. Sit down."

Walter sat obediently.

„Jack, hold him still."

Jack stood up, knowing what was next, and quickly put his hands on the sides of Walt's head, above his ears. „Be quick."

„What- „ Walter didn't have a lot of time to say anything before Erik lay his thumb and index finger on both sides of his nose and pulled it, quickly and precisely, back into place. Walter let out a single blood-curdling scream as his vision went blurry with pain.

„I'm sorry, Walt", Erik said flatly, wiping the blood off his fingers with the rag Yana handed to him. „I would have warned you, but it hurts less when you don't know what's coming."

„I hate you", Walt choked through the tears. He clasped his hands around his nose like a shell, not touching it and breathing through his mouth.

„I know." Erik stood up. „Do we still have that disinfecting alcohol?" he turned to Alina.

„That's... not a method I would have used", she tore her gaze from Walt to look at him.

„I know, I know. Either way, it's over now." I'm not fine with it either, so if you could please stop staring at me like I'm some sort of child beater, that would be lovely, thanks. I feel sick already. He shrugged, leaning on the wall. They only had three chairs anyway; he wouldn't fight to be in the center of the room.

„But it had to be done", she must have realized it as well. „Walter, that was very brave. You pulled through it like a hero. It's time for some much-

needed reward", she opened the small cabinet. „I would normally make you eat some soup first, but here you go. See how many of these muffins you can finish while we wash that blood off your face."

„I want some", Piotr stood up. Alina had noticed he was silently attentive the whole time; he hugged Yana's leg when Walter screamed, but seemed otherwise unbothered by the whole scene. How is he so calm with all of this going on? Is it because the adults are acting calm? I need to remember this for later. She dug out a bottle of disinfectant they had and some gauze. It was a necessity in their home from back when Erik did a lot of manual labor; he would occasionally get small injuries and preferred treating them himself instead of waiting to see if he would need a doctor.

„You had enough already", Yana raised her eyebrow at him. Alina walked up to Walt and opened the bottle. „Sorry Walt, this might sting. But no more surprises, I promise."

„Unghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh", Piotr rolled his eyes. Walt remained remarkably calm while Alina patted at the scrapes on his face, even though she could see he was twitching and blinking with pain. Tough kid.

„You're going to take sweets away from the boy with a broken nose?" Yana asked. „Is that how I taught you?"

„Noooooo." He looked around the room, guiltily. „He needs them more."

„Good boy", Yana smiled, giving him a small plate of muffins. Piotr carried them carefully across the small room before giving them over to Jack, who placed them on the table near Walt. Piotr then crawled under the table and around Alina's legs, stopping to sit on the floor next to Walt. He looked at him with interest; he'd never had a friend this old before. He wondered what boys this big even did.

„I'll be going now", Jack stood up and announced after a little while, lifting Piotr and placing him on his chair so he wouldn't sit on the floor. „This kitchen is getting a bit crowded. I'm glad you're alright, Walter, and don't hesitate to call me if you need anything. You know where I work", he winked at him. He put on his coat and hat, hesitating as he opened the door.

„You were very brave tonight, young man", he said, casting a glance in the general direction where Erik and Walter stood. Neither of them knew who he was referring to exactly, but both could swear it was the other one. Jack slammed the door behind him, smiling to himself.

ooo

„Walter", Alina started gently as she leaned back in her chair, putting down the gauze. „Would you like to tell me what happened, if it's alright?" she had cleaned and bandaged Walter's nose and the rest of his injuries according to Erik's instructions. She thought it would have been easier if he just did it himself, but Erik looked like he would faint if he touched Walter one more time, so she didn't bring it up anymore. Walter wasn't too eager to let him do it either, even though his anger was mellowing down slightly as he noticed his breathing getting easier than before.

„Nothing special", Walter shrugged. „My old man is drunk as hell. He needs a punching bag."

„And that punching bag is you?" Alina asked calmly. Erik, standing behind her, could hear the fury concealed in her tone.

„No, my mom. He's pissed at her", he looked at Alina. „and at you, too. He doesn't want me to stay in school, and she kept pushing him about it a few days ago. You said it would be a good idea."

„Oh", Alina whispered, color draining from her face. Erik left his designated place by the wall to sit next to her. „It's my fault", she barely managed.

„Maybe. But it was just an excuse", Walt admitted. „He's been pissed at her, at all of us, for years. Hell knows why."

„Where is your mother now?" Yana asked, leaning on the counter with her arms crossed.

„She went to the neighbors, I think. He came at her, and then I started punching him and she took Dan and Mary with her so they wouldn't get in

his way", Walt explained. „He's probably passed out by now, and she'll stay there until he gets sober." It was a well-rehearsed dance by now.

„She left you there?" Alina whispered.

„Yea. Not like she could stop him", Walt shrugged. He also felt it was more appropriate for him to get the beating, seeing as his school was the cause of it all.

„Where are your older brothers? Hank and Sam?"

„At work. They work night shifts."

„And the neighbors? They didn't help?" Yana asked further. What kind of a place is this? If someone in my village beat their wife and son like this, all of the neighbors would be at his throat immediately. People need to realize when it's time to stop minding their own business.

„I don't know what they did. When mom left, I punched him in the stomach, locked the door, and bolted." He looked at Alina. „I heard you can kill someone if you punch them in the stomach hard enough. I hope that's what happened."

„No you don't", Yana puffed. „he's your dad. You want to love him, not kill him."

Alina and Erik looked at her in shock, about to say that that was not an appropriate response when Walter sobbed a little, tears streaming down his face.

Yana walked over to him, stroking his back. „That is fine. Your father is unnatural, not you."

„We're both the same", Walter gritted angrily through his tears.

„No. You can choose to be different." Alina took over. „You don't go around beating kids smaller than you."

„I used to", Walt admitted.

„Doesn't matter. You don't anymore. You changed since I met you", Alina smiled. „It's much easier to just be born good than to learn it yourself. And I'm proud of you", she added.

Erik sat in his seat, looking at the wall across from him. The kid is taking all of this attention remarkably well. I probably would have disappeared by now. „Walter, if you want to, you can stay here tonight", he said. Alina would probably hesitate to bring it up first.

„Yes, of course", Alina looked at him, then Walter again. „You can sleep in my room. We'll think of something to do in the morning."

„Please don't do anything", Walter shook his head. You've done enough.

"I won't do anything you don't want me to", Alina hesitated, "I don't even know what we can do yet. But don't worry, your safety is my biggest concern."

"I'm fine."

"Sure. Here, have this blanket", she stood up, occupying herself while she thought. "I'll give you some clean sheets, and... what else do we need?" her voice trailed off as she went into the room, gathering and rearranging things. Piotr started yawning, and so Yana scooped him up in her arms.

"Bye. We'll come back in the morning to check up", she said, looking at both Erik and Walter.

"No need, but thank you", Erik replied. Piotr waved his hand at Walter sleepily as they left. Walter waved back with visible amusement.

Erik sat in silence as Yana left, tapping some strange rhythm with his fingers and thinking to himself when Walter's voice shook him out of it.

"How'd you know where to find me?"

"Huh?" he blinked. "It wasn't that hard. It was the least populated place you liked. You even told me about it."

"And why?"

"Why what?" Erik frowned.

"Why'd you come after me?"

"Because you were injured", Erik shifted uncomfortably.

"How is it any of your business?" Walter asked. There was no anger or defiance in his voice, only genuine curiosity. Something about his bluntness still unnerved Erik; he didn't feel like discussing his motivations with a twelve-year-old boy.

"You're annoyingly unafraid of me, kid, do you know that?" Erik turned to him, stopping his tapping. "Alina's business is my business, as it has always been. She cares about you and doesn't want you to suffer, so I'm trying to help her with that."

"Mhm. Okay", Walter said, grabbing another muffin. "Thanks. I'd have to go back if you didn't find me", he finished with his mouth full.

The door opened and Alina came back, carrying some small clothes she had left over from the December charity, and handed them to Walter.

"Here you go. You can change into these." She looked at Walter. "I think it's best if you go to sleep now. I think it's the last time any of us are coherent enough to think about this. Can you sleep?"

"Sure", Walter took the clothes. He wasn't usually too eager to go to bed, but it was incredibly late and as the adrenaline left him, he realized how heavy and sore his limbs were. "See ya in the morning."

"Good night", Alina walked him to his room and closed the door. As she returned, she silently kept a straight face and walked right past Erik to go to his room. He took the cue and followed right behind her.

Alina barely closed the door behind her when she started crying silently. Erik, wondering if this night would ever be over, walked over to her and embraced her. She kept crying into his shirt.

„It's my fault", she whispered.

„No. It's not."

„I told her to talk him into it."

„And he told himself to beat the life out of his son when he realized there might be a chance for him to have a better life. Whatever you do, Preston will make it worse. You can't win with people like him", Erik said, stroking her back. Don't ask me how I know that.

Alina sobbed a little more audibly.

„We'll think of something. I've got your back", Erik offered. „I won't let this happen. You were right about Walt."

„What can we even do? Tell the police?"

„Maybe we can't", especially me, „but I think Jack could pull some strings. We'll ask him what to do in the morning."

"Are you alright?" Alina asked, pulling away.

"I'm fine."

"You look traumatized", she said carefully.

"I have been calm through this entire infinitely long evening", he waved his hand in frustration. "I've pulled a beaten kid out of hiding, set his nose with my bare hands, and debated with him the ethics of murdering his father. And now I'm trying to help you. I don't see what I could have done better."

"I didn't say you could have done anything better", she caught his hand. "You have been so remarkably competent through all of this that I don't know what I would have done without you."

"What is it, then?"

"Those are all objectively traumatizing things", she shrugged. "I might have fainted in your place."

"I was closer to it than you'd think", he admitted. "Can we not talk about it?"

"Of course." Alina looked around and sat down. "We might have some logistical problems to solve, such as the fact we only have one bed."

"Oh, you can take it."

"And you?"

"I don't think I'd sleep anyway", Erik shrugged. "I'll be in the kitchen. I'll find some way to occupy myself. You should get some sleep before morning; Walt will still need you before he goes back."

Alina opened her mouth to protest, but he just lightly kissed her forehead and started walking out. "Get some sleep. I'll see you in the morning."

He settled relatively comfortably in the kitchen with a book to pass the time when Alina's door opened and she came out, wrapped in her blanket, and sat next to him. Erik looked at her in confusion as she took another book and huddled on the chair next to his.

"I won't have it", she said. "We're in this together. Walt is my student. If you're going to sacrifice your comfort for his safety, I can at least keep you company."

"That's slightly unreasonable", he said gently. "I am perfectly capable of entertaining myself. And I don't mind not sleeping. You, on the other hand, should be sharp tomorrow, because Walter will need you."

"Pah. I'm perfectly capable of being sharp after a sleepless night. Don't underestimate people who work with children", she retorted, opening her book.

"Alright", he smiled. Good luck with that.

Of course, while Alina technically could stay up all night, the chances were low that she actually would. Sure enough, within one hour she started to doze off, laying her head on her elbows on the table and barely reading. She slowly closed her eyes and, after a while, her breathing grew slower.

"You held out like a hero, darling", he whispered with amusement at her sleeping form. Alina didn't stir, so he gently scooped her up and carried her into his bed. As he turned to leave, he felt a hand tug on his sleeve. Alina, her eyes still closed and mouth in a half-smile, held onto his shirt.

"You can read here", she mumbled.

"Impressively manipulative for someone who's half-asleep", he remarked. But then again, she looked quite cute with the sleepy smile and her hair spilling everywhere. "Alright. Wait here." He picked up his book and candle and sat at the foot of the bed, leaning on the wall. Alina curled up next to him, falling into a deep sleep within minutes. She slept peacefully and barely stirred through the night as Erik found his free hand occasionally reaching out to gently move the hair out of her face.

He didn't remember falling asleep, but he woke up in the morning, still sitting with his book open on his lap and Alina curled up next to him with her hand in his.

ooo

Walter woke up fairly early. It took him a second to realize where he was and what had happened; the soreness in his limbs and head reminded him quickly enough. He got up and looked around the room. It was so strange to even imagine his teacher out of her classroom, let alone be in her bedroom. It was fairly tiny, but it still fit a bed, a small desk, and a makeshift bookshelf. Walter knew what homemade furniture looked like, but these were nice. They were made out of cheap materials, but still carefully crafted. He wondered if the weird guy made them for her. This entire house, although tiny and made in a hurry, had weird details around it that didn't fit – starting with the enormous amount of paper stars hanging all around the kitchen, for example. These people were a weird nut to crack, and more amusing than Walter had previously imagined.

He got dressed and left the room to see teacher Alina was already awake, making eggs for breakfast. Walter sat at the table, wondering if it was understood that he would politely leave before breakfast or that he would politely stay for it. Politeness was such bullshit, and he hated that he occasionally had to engage in it.

"Good morning, Walter", she smiled. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes. I'll have to go home soon", he replied. "My mom will be worried. Pops might even try to start looking for me if I'm not back soon. It's much better if I find him than if he finds me, believe me." He looked around. Nobody else was in the kitchen. Maybe they already left? He must have slept a lot longer than he thought.

"I'm setting you free as soon as you eat your breakfast", the Teacher replied. "I'll be damned if – oops, I didn't say that – if any child leaves my home hungry."

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Walter was finishing his eggs when the two men entered the room and sat by the table. Mr. Erik was becoming somewhat more likable as he got to know him better, but Mr. Franklin looked at Walter with that concern in his eyes, like he could break at any time, which made him severely annoyed. The man probably meant well, but he didn't seem to understand him at all and Walter wasn't too keen on talking to someone who seemingly considered Walter some sort of a freak.

"I'm done. I have to go now", he announced to Teacher Alina.

"I'll take you", Erik stood up, looking for his scarf.

"You don't -" Walt started, slight worry in his voice.

"No, we'll take you", Jack offered. "Don't worry about it. Just gather your things; we'll handle it. I promise we won't cause you any trouble."

Alina packed the last of the muffins in a small bundle for Walt, along with some dry fruit. She gave Walt an old brown scarf she'd had for years and never wore, insisting he wrapped his neck in it warm up and over his still-swollen nose.

"See you soon, Walt", she said. "Come by whenever you want. Alright?"

"Yeah, okay", Walt mumbled through the scarf. "Thanks for all the cake."

They spent the short walk to Walter's house in awkward silence. Walter seemed to grow more concerned as they went closer; he stopped talking and only responded to Jack's rambling, in short, moody one-word replies. Jack looked over him at Erik with concern, silently begging him to take over.

"Will you be alright?" Erik asked quietly, noticing Walter's shoulders slouching under some heavy pressure. "Is your father going to be mad?"

"Nah", he shrugged. "He'll be calm by now. It's fine. He'll be sick and probably just complain."

"Hm." Erik looked in front of him, lost in thought.

"If you change your mind, you know where to find us", Jack offered gently. "We'll help you in any way we can."

"No thanks. It's fine."

They reached the Prestons' home soon – a tiny, worn-down house, bigger than Erik's but in desperate need of some repairs. Erik remarked to himself sadly that he might have fixed some houses last year that looked less broken than this one. It's a shame. Somebody did try fixing this wall at some point, but their resources were very limited. As was their expertise.

"Good luck, Walt", Erik said, feeling a pang of sadness as he and Jack stood at a reasonable distance.

"Bye, Mister Demon", Walt said and continued walking.

As Walter walked away and tried to enter the house, the front door opened to reveal Hank Preston standing to greet him. His eyes were bloodshot, his hair disheveled and his skin gray-looking; he looked like he was having one magnificent hangover. Erik noticed cold fury on Preston's face - he wasn't in the least bit worried about Walter's injuries or whereabouts and seemed simply irritated by the fact he left his home without permission.

„Decided to come back,?" he asked. Walt's shoulders twitched slightly, but he just shrugged.

„Where have you been?" he crossed his arms, guarding the doorway.

„Neighbors", Walt replied.

„Yeah? Some new neighbors I haven't heard of?" Preston raised his eyebrows. „You think you can lie to me, boy?" He pointed a finger at Walter. Erik saw his hands shaking and wondered if it was from the hangover or if he was angrier than they had anticipated.

„He was with us, sir", Jack called politely from a distance, tipping his hat. „I'm an affiliate of principal Dowling. I found Walter injured, so I wanted to make sure he got medical attention before I brought him back."

Preston looked at him, confused and slightly afraid. He knew who Franklin was; some of his friends worked at the construction site and they told him Franklin usually had the last word among the bosses. „Uh, alright. But we coulda take care of it ourselves. No need to bother with Walt, he gets in fights all the time."

„It wasn't a problem, sir", Jack smiled. Erik was giving his best to seem invisible next to him, wrapped in his scarf and hat, but Walter turned around and, surprising everyone present, quietly said, „Thank you, Mr. Franklin. Mr. Erik."

Oh no. That was a mistake. Preston's foggy mind seemed to focus on Erik for the first time, recognizing him from the other day.

„It's you", he hissed. „What do you want from us?"

Erik blinked. „Sorry?"

„Why do you keep hanging around Walt? What do you want with him?" Preston started walking towards him, gesturing for Walt to go inside. Walt obeyed, casting a frightened glance at Erik. Erik gave him a tiny nod. Don't bother, kid. You have enough to worry about.

„Nothing", he replied flatly, hoping Walter wouldn't hear him from inside. „Miss Boričević deals with him. I have hardly anything to do with it." Jack was trying to think of a proper response to calm down the situation, however, having two unstable, easily angered men was too much even for him to improvise that easily on, so he kept silent. I hope Erik will have enough common sense not to get provoked until I can think of what to do.

„Bullshit", Preston snapped, standing a bit too close and talking much too loud for Erik's taste. „I see you around all the time, and now you just happen to be here when he wanders off and goes missing! Where did you take him?"

„To his teacher", Erik whispered politely. „I accidentally saw him injured in the street and he asked me for help, so I took him to the nearest responsible adult."

„Fuck you!" Preston raised his voice some more until it was ricocheting inside Erik's sleep-deprived head... „Don't give me that shit! I don't want him near you again!"

„Sir, we didn't mean any offense –„ Jack started desperately.

„I'm afraid that isn't up to me. I'm not the one seeking out Walter – „ Erik was holding onto the last delicate, frayed threads of his patience.

„I don't care! It will be up to you, or I swear to God, Walter won't be the only one that goes missing! I might have another talk with your little teacher, and this time I won't be so nice!" Preston spat on the ground in front of him and turned around to walk back to his house.

Erik stared at the ground. Oh, I remember when someone last threatened and spat at me. A small bolt of tingly needles started forming in the base of his spine.

Jack looked after Preston as he entered his house, and rolled his eyes – empty threats from a powerless man; he would not do anything and they both knew it. For all his low profile, the man knew well enough who Jack was and who he knew, and why it would be a horrible idea for someone like Preston to mess with his associates.

Erik didn't seem to follow that line of thinking, because he, after a moment of standing completely stiff, suddenly jerked forward and started walking swiftly and soundlessly toward the house. Jack immediately grabbed his sleeve.

"Hey, hey, hey, bad idea, bad idea –" he started, pulling him back.

Erik pulled forward, seemingly in a trance.

"Erik, stop –"

He suddenly turned around in one swift and eerie motion, looking at Jack as if he just realized he was still there.

"Let me go", he said in a flat, hollow tone. His eyes were completely expressionless.

"I'm afraid I can't do that", Jack replied. "This is a bad idea –"

Erik jerked his sleeve violently and Jack let go in surprise; he started walking again. Oh, no you won't, Jack quickly ran in front of him, dragging him back with his hands.

"Erik, he won't do anything, it's just empty talk – "

Erik stumbled slightly, stepped back, and shifted his focus from the house to Jack. He must have realized Jack wouldn't give up so easily because he started walking toward him in that same fast, eerie, unnatural way. Jack walked backward in front of him, still waving his hands to stop him. "Erik,

calm down, what are you doing? He's just being an ass, what are you going to do, drag him out of his own home?"

"Je vais arracher son cœur battant de sa poitrine1 ", the empty shell in Erik's body whispered, looking at Jack. "And yours, if you don't move."

"I'm afraid I won't move", Jack said. "I won't let you do this. Stop it, right now." He tried to shove him back once again, harder this time, but Erik stepped back in one swift motion and, as Jack's hands met with thin air and he lost his balance, hit the side of his head with his left fist.

Jack stumbled and stood hunched over, holding his temples as his vision blurred. He felt a trail of something warm pour out of his nose; he wasn't so badly injured, but his nose had always had an annoying tendency to bleed whenever his head was hurt. Oh, that's it then. Time to find a new business partner.

"You fucking maniac." He lifted his gaze, putting down his hands and balling them into fists, ready for the next punch.

Erik stood in front of him, fist still in the air and eyes widening as he seemed to snap out of whatever trance he was in.

"I – what did I do?"

"Nice left hook, asshole." Jack wiped the blood with his sleeve.

"I hit you!"

"No shit", Jack spat out. He used to be into boxing in his younger days; he was not so sensitive to not being able to take a few punches, but he had to admit Erik had quite a swing for someone who seemed so skinny. Not to mention the left-handedness; he didn't expect an attack from that side. He was still slightly dizzy.

Erik grabbed his head, pulling at his hair. "I hit you! Are you hurt? Did I hit your nose? Why did I –"

Jack was starting to get confused. Was he trying to confuse him? Was this a ploy to get him out of his way? "You don't remember?"

"I – " he stopped, his eyes darting left and right in panic. "I remember some things, but –"

"As for why you hit me because I tried to stop your incredibly stupid ass from making a horrible mistake", Jack patted at his temple lightly. This will leave a lovely bump. I'll be sleeping on my other side for a while. "What were you going to do, fight Preston? Kill him? Would that have helped you? Or Alina? Walter?"

"I – " his breathing grew frantic. "No, no no – I don't want to do that!"

"Don't lie." Jack frowned in disdain.

"I would have done it, but I don't want to!" he pulled harder at his hair digging his nails into his scalp, trying to focus on the pain and not the panic that threatened to send him spiraling into madness again. He leaned on the wall behind him and hunched over slightly, trying to think. Needles and tingles still shot through his spine and black spots were still in his vision, but they weren't spreading; if he focused on one spot on the ground and breathed deeply he could maybe stop himself from slipping away.

Jack watched him silently for a few moments. He's insane. I'm insane, too, if I stay near someone so unstable. Who's going to be next? Is he going to kill someone someday and claim not to remember it?

He stood and waited silently until Erik's breathing slowed down to normal again.

"Does this kind of thing happen often to you?" he asked.

Erik waited a few moments to answer, not looking at him. "Sometimes."

"When?"

"When I'm in danger."

"Whenever you're afraid?" Jack raised his eyebrows.

"No, no", he shook his head. "If that were so, I'd never been conscious. Only when I'm in real danger."

Jack felt a little bit of his anger melt off at that confession.

"And what do you do then?"

"I don't know exactly", he sighed. "I black out and start attacking, or running. By the time I'm back in here", he shook his head, "it's already over. Sometimes I don't remember anything, sometimes I do."

"And this time you stopped", Jack remarked. "That doesn't fit."

"I came back when I saw blood", Erik whispered. "I've never hit a – a friend before." That was true; the shock of seeing Jack injured and bleeding at his hand awakened a different sort of feeling – sorrow - that pushed back the fear and anger. He didn't mean to say it, much less admit Jack was his friend, but it wouldn't mean much anyway after he was ready to rip him in half moments ago. It was nice knowing you, Jack.

"You weren't in danger now", Jack pressed. "He went to his house. Why follow him?"

"He – he threatened Alina", Erik swallowed; the black spots returned as he remembered Preston's words. "I had to finish him right away, or he would have come when I wasn't looking."

"What?" Jack hissed. What kind of insane, warped logic is that? "He will do nothing of the sort. Do you think you're the only one looking out for Alina? For your friends? Preston will get all the warning he needs to back down, and Alina will get all the protection she needs in the meantime, but we will do it my way. None of this… whatever the hell this was."

Erik buried his face in his hands. "Thank you."

"No problem", Jack replied coldly. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going home. I've had enough for today." He turned around and started walking

home.

After a few steps, Jack stopped, sighed, and turned around again, returning to look at Erik who was still staring at the ground through his fingers.

"That's pathetic", he remarked. Erik glanced at him for a second but showed no other sign of movement or understanding.

"If you want to apologize, apologize like a man", Jack scoffed. "These dramatics mean nothing to me. Stand up straight and own up to your actions."

"Would it matter?" Erik scowled bitterly.

"Does your self-loathing matter to me? I get nothing from it. If I wanted you to suffer, I could've just hit you back. Apologizing might work because I actually might get the feeling you give a damn how I'm affected by this."

Very, very slowly, Erik lowered his hands from his face and straightened up.

"I apologize. I'm sorry I hit you", he recited, looking at some distant point on the horizon.

"Apology accepted", Jack nodded. "Now, this was our first fight, so I think it should be commemorated. I have some good whiskey in my house."

"Excuse me?"

"Don't let it get to your head," Jack smiled. "That was one fantastic left hook, but the next time you try that, I'm putting you on the ground."

"You'd like to think that", Erik's mouth twitched slightly upwards.

"Well, we'll toast to never finding out", Jack winked, leading the way.

Chapter 14:The Good Whiskey

"You know, you've been close to snapping since we found Walt", Jack said later as he poured whiskey into two glasses and passed one to Erik. "Why not just take a break, if it was too much for you?"

"I have been close to snapping for about thirty years", Erik sighed, downing the whole thing in one go. "The only break I'll ever take will be when I die."

"I see." Jack poured him another glass, hoping he wouldn't regret it; luckily, Erik seemed to have enough common sense to pace himself a bit with that one.

"And I promised not to", Erik added, just in case Jack wanted to ask the obvious why not die then? Why are you burdening yourself and others with all this nonsense?

"Not to die?" Jack turned to him in surprise. He, on the other hand, would not have thought in a million years to ask someone why they hadn't killed themselves yet.

"So to speak. At least not to die for nothing", he shrugged. He had no idea why he was telling Jack all of this; he hadn't spoken about it in months, as he never told Yana about it and Alina didn't mention it. Was he developing a need to confide in people? Well, maybe just the ones that pour me large amounts of alcohol after I threaten to kill them. "it was a... sort of pact. I promised if others would let me live like a human, I would act like one." He waved his hand dismissively. "I'm not good at it."

"I've seen men throw punches over much smaller offenses, and they didn't spiral into such existentialism because of it", Jack smiled. "Was that pact you made with Alina?"

"Yes", Erik mumbled in embarrassment.

"Is that why you're so much calmer around her?"

"Yes and no. Part of it is the promise. The other part is the fog", he blurted out.

"The fog? Did I hear you correctly?"

"Uh... it's hard to explain. The anger is... sharp. The blackouts start with needles in my spine", he looked at the glass, swirling the liquid around. "Alina puts a sort of... cotton fog in my head, whenever she's around. It's like having a splitting headache and laying your head down on soft pillows", he rambled. Sometimes literally. "It doesn't cloud my thinking, just… makes me less alert. It softens the spikes, and they don't appear so often", he finished barely above a whisper.

"Well, that was a very beautiful way of putting it", Jack remarked, deciding maybe Erik had deserved a little more of the whiskey. "You're an interesting combination of poetry and violence, has anyone ever told you that?"

"Sadly, yes, they have." Erik finished his glass.

Silence spread around the room.

Jack wasn't going to let this evening end on such a sour note, and since his companion seemed to be spontaneously sinking into alcohol-fueled sadness, he would have to do something.

"Never really found a girl like that, myself", Jack laughed. "Not my time to settle down yet. I have things I need to do first."

"Hmm." Erik wasn't sure what the appropriate response to that was, so he erred on the side of caution again.

But then, as silence spread once again, he realized that may have been the rude thing to do.

"Uh, what things?" he offered.

"Oh, you know", Jack waved his free hand. "Wild adventures. Getting filthy rich. Seducing many questionable ladies before finding one who can outsmart me. I've done some of those, but I'm not that old that I can't have some more fun", he laughed.

"How old are you?" Erik asked. He realized again he had the bad habit of not asking people the most basic questions when he met them; truth be told, his other bad habit of asking them inappropriately late times wasn't helping much either.

"Thirty-four."

"And what have you done so far? Of those things." Erik leaned forward in his seat slightly. The alcohol in his blood was making him less withdrawn; he was slowly finding it easier to think of questions to ask.

"Oh, mostly adventures. I joined the army for two years, but that didn't work out. After I finished school, I got into boxing, and I even got pretty far before I realized taking one too many hits might leave me less able-minded than I would prefer, so I stopped. I worked as an investigative journalist for years when I was in my twenties; I've covered so many murders, scandals, and intrigues that you wouldn't believe", he laughed. "I traveled all across the country. I had ideas for how I'd get rich and famous - gold, stocks, trade, you know. All those things that look much easier and more exciting when you don't have to do them." he paused. "I came back home a few years ago. I had family here, and… they had some trouble, so I tried to help. Mafia got to them, and they had to move in the end. But I can proudly say I took part in the recent purge of crime across this island", he finished. "A lot of people still owe me favors around here, and I can cash them in as long as I keep quiet about it."

"That's a lot of interesting things", Erik said, looking genuinely impressed.

"I'm sure you've done plenty of adventuring yourself", Jack smiled. "What are your stories?"

"I have none. I lived alone all my life, and never went outside much." Technically, that was true.

"Surely you have some? You don't strike me as someone who hasn't lived much, not at all. You're one of the toughest mysteries to crack, and that's coming from a journalist. I have known you for half a year, and I still don't even know why you're wearing that mask all the time", Jack gestured.

"Ngh." Erik sat back and crossed his arms. "Of course, that. Just in case I forgot it was there." He would have been a lot more offended by this if he was sober, but right now he didn't have the energy for that.

"I even asked Alina, and she didn't help me much either", Jack shrugged.

"What did she say?" Erik asked carefully. How did she describe it?

"She said, 'he wears it because he's stubborn, rolled her eyes, and changed the subject", Jack laughed. "I won't push it. I asked you here to have a good time, not to interrogate you. Stop being so annoyed."

"I'm not", Erik said in an annoyed tone, feeling very annoyed. "There is no good story behind it. It's horrible, disgusting... it has always been like this since I was born, and it keeps causing me problems constantly no matter how much I try to hide it. I am so, so tired of it, frankly, and I don't want to talk about it, because it's all people ever notice about me, and I never get a single waking or sleeping moment to forget about it!" he took a breath. "I can be other things, not just…"

"You are many other things", Jack hurried. "I'm sorry I asked."

"Alright."

"For example, I would bet that you're good at chess."

"I don't know. I might be."

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About an hour and two lost matches later, Jack remarked, "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea."

"Oh, I don't know", Erik grinned. "I'm having fun, to be honest. Another one?"

"I thought you didn't know how to play chess", Jack narrowed his eyes at him. He reached for the whiskey again. The level of liquid in the glass was getting concerningly low.

"No, no, that's not what I said. I said I've never played it with another person", Erik nodded with a very smug look in his eyes, passing him his glass.

"Maybe that's good", Jack retorted. "If you're this insufferable about it."

"You're a sore loser, aren't you?" Erik kept smiling. "There's no need to hurt my feelings. Didn't we just establish that we're friends?"

"Ngh." Jack groaned, pouring them another drink.

"You're my first male friend", Erik smiled dreamily, looking at some invisible point in the wall.

Jack stopped, the bottle still in mid-air. "Excuse me?"

"Haha, yes, that sounded completely wrong", Erik laughed a little. "Did you think I was going to say I've had many female friends? I had exactly one friend before I came to New York, and she was my mother. My real mother, not the woman that gave birth to me", he stopped for a split second. Well, there was also Christine, but for all of our time spent together, I never really treated her as a friend. Maybe that was the problem. "I don't go about introducing myself to people. You're my first male friend, ever. I wonder if that's different. Is it different? Talking to Yana is easy, but I don't imagine her personality is exactly normal for most people. Talking to Alina is easy in some ways but hard in others. You have to look people in the eye when they speak to you, Antoinette said so, but hers are so easy to get lost in", he finished, smiling serenely to himself.

Jack stared at him for several seconds completely still before saying, "You're the strangest drunk I've ever met."

"Only when I'm drunk?"

"Keep in mind you have so far avoided making any sort of contact with me aside from what was necessary, and now you're telling me all of this."

"That was before I punched you in the head. And then you invited me to your house and gave me your good whiskey", Erik nodded. "Am I the strange one here? Is this how men become friends? If I'd known that, my life could have been easier", he started to laugh again. "It seems that lately, I can only act nice towards people after they have seen me at my absolute worst", he thought out loud, getting serious again. Jack was starting to get a headache just from trying to keep up with his moods as they changed.

"Not the best way to go about it", Jack decided it might be best if he hurried a bit with his whiskey and just played along with whatever the hell was going on.

"It does sound quite stupid, doesn't it? And yet, the one time I didn't do it, it backfired in such a monumental disaster I almost died. It seems that it's very dangerous for me to pretend to be something I'm not." he sighed. "Not to mention, when they get disappointed it's really…"

"You don't have to say anything you don't want to", Jack remarked, because it seemed like Erik had forgotten the difference between saying things in his head and saying them out loud. Maybe he never knew the difference in the first place; he just jumped straight from one extreme to another.

"That's nice of you", Erik replied with the gentlest look in his eyes Jack had ever seen him cast his way. "You're a good person, Jack, better than I deserve. As are the other people who have granted me the gift of their company. I don't know how that happened, but I'll do my best not to let you all down."

"I believe you", Jack hurried. "And I don't think it's true. I would not be around someone if I didn't think they deserved my company. I value myself quite highly", his mouth twitched upwards in a crooked smile. "Alright, I think we should play another one before we call it a night. Black or white?"

"Black."

"You're annoying me with this", Jack laughed. He put one black and one white pawn in each hand, hiding them behind his back. "Alright, pick one."

"Do you think I won't know where the black one will be?"

"Will you?"

"It will annoy you, even more, Jack. I'm a better illusionist than you. Just give me the black one."

Jack rolled his eyes, pulling his hands back out and handing him the figure.

"I was bluffing", Erik said cheerfully, taking the black pawn and sorting the figures on the board. "I had no idea where it was."

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A few hours later, Alina looked up from reading her book at the kitchen table to see Erik entering, very slowly and carefully with an uncharacteristically embarrassed smile on his face.

"Where have you been?" She raised her eyebrows in amusement.

"Jack's", he gave her a dreamy smile. "I punched him in the head, and now we're friends." He walked shakily over to the room, kissed her forehead, and crashed into his bed without another word.

Chapter 15:Investigations

May 1894.; Paris

One year prior

Dear Amelia,

Of course, you can come. I assure you that Alina's travels have been paid for in full and her safety is secured, as she is with an old and trusted friend of mine. I understand that you and your family have not been properly prepared or informed about this – Alina does have a certain flair for dramatic disappearances – and I will happily answer any questions you have. You can come to visit me in May if you'd like, anytime. I'm looking forward to speaking with you.

Kind regards,

Antoinette Giry.

Amelija loved Paris.

She loved the sights, the sounds, the smells, the fashion, the food, and the people; she loved the music, the buildings, and the streets, she loved the weather (slightly colder than in her hometown) and she loved the feeling of adventure all of those things gave her.

Right now, unfortunately, she would not be able to enjoy any of those things until she took care of what she came here to do.

She stepped out of her tiny rented room with anticipation and insecurity - not in herself, but rather in the whole situation she was supposed to handle. She was reasonably sure that whatever was waiting for her here, she would

do as well as anyone could in her situation; she simply would have preferred to have a clearer idea of what the situation was. She hated being caught off guard and she hated being out of her element.

She vaguely remembered where Madame lived - she would not have been able to find it by memory alone, but luckily, Alina's room had indeed provided her with enough information on her address and how to get there (the instructions were clear enough even for a fool that didn't speak any French, so Amelija who spoke it fluently would have no problem navigating the streets at all).

Did she arrive at Giry's apartment in the late afternoon to realize that neither Madame nor her daughter - Meg, was it? Amelija vaguely remembered her - were home. Inconvenient, but nothing terrible. Amelija would simply wander around and try to have fun around the city, and come back later. French people didn't exactly go to bed early - Amelija wasn't very concerned that she would be able to come late enough to offend them or wake them up.

She wandered around Paris, looking at shop windows and listening to street musicians when she remembered that Madame worked in the Opera - incidentally, one of the places Amelija wanted to visit. It might be a good idea to go and leave a message there for Madame Giry, and while she's at it she could see if they had any performances soon she might be interested in.

Amelija made her way toward the venue - it surprised her to see that the beautiful building seemed to be under some construction. Some parts were roped off and showed slight structural damage that looked recent; what in the world happened? Why does that wall look charred? It was all slightly strange, and she looked around the half-empty lobby in surprise until a young, blonde girl stopped to ask her if she needed anything. Of course, it was too early for a performance, and they were likely going through rehearsals now. She was probably acting strange wandering around the lobby by herself.

The young blonde girl Amelija recognized as Meg Giry looked at her with suspicion.

"Hello", Amelija smiled. "I'm looking for Madame Antoinette Giry; I'm an acquaintance of hers. You're Meg, aren't you? Maybe you can help me."

"I'm Meg, yes", the girl said slowly.

"I'm Amelija Boričević", she clarified. "You probably remember my sister, Alina? She's your mother's friend."

"Ah, Alina", Meg's eyes lit up with recognition. "Yes, I remember. Is she well?"

"That's what I'm here to find out", Amelija said. "I'd like to talk to your mother about her if that's alright."

"Oh." Meg frowned. "She has classes for a few more hours. Would it be a problem if you come later or maybe tomorrow? She can't leave; we're in the middle of preparing for this new performance - "

"No, not at all. I'll be here for a few more days, anyway. I can wait for her so we can make plans if that's alright", Amelija offered. "I won't bother you, you'll hardly notice me at all."

"Oh, it's no problem", Meg lit up. "You can wait with me in my dressing room, I'm free today anyway. I was going to meet up with a friend later - in fact, you can come with me, if you'd like." Meg remembered Amelija vaguely - but having been brought up by her mother she adopted her need to make people feel welcome and included whenever she could. She didn't want the foreign lady to feel alone; surely Christine would understand if she joined them just this once. Meg led her to her room - tiny, but impeccably tidy. Amelija was normally very pedantic herself, but even she felt slightly nervous around ballerinas and their often obsessive neatness.

"Thank you. I would like to if it's no problem", Amelija admitted. She was a tiny bit lonely here in Paris; she wouldn't mind it for a couple of days but having some company would be nice.

"How have you been, anyway?" Meg asked, pulling up two chairs. "I haven't seen you in years. How are your studies going?"

"Well enough. I was planning to go to Vienna this summer. I found a very good math tutor."

"Vienna sounds incredible. I've never been there."

"Well, it's relatively close to my city", Amelija grinned. "It's practical, now that Alina is gone, that I don't wander off too far for too long."

"Are you going to visit Alina in London?"

"No. You didn't know?" Amelija asked. "Alina left for New York a few months ago. She said your mother helped her arrange it."

"Did she?" Meg blinked, taken aback. "Is that so?"

"Yes. You didn't know?"

"Oh, I know she helped take someone to New York, though she hoped to keep it from me, I didn't know it was Alina."

"From what I heard, she wasn't alone, either."

"Hmm." Meg looked away, biting her lip.

"Pardon me saying, but I feel as if you're keeping something very unpleasant from me."

"Oh, it's nothing. I don't know why Alina left, and I have some theories about why she might have, but I think you'll be better off asking mom. I don't want to worry you for no reason."

I'm already worried for so many reasons, Amelija wanted to scream but decided against it. Patience would be the best approach here; there were many secrets she had to unearth and now was not the right time to press on it, having just arrived.

"What are you practicing for?" Amelija asked, trying to keep the conversation going. If this girl was kind enough to invite her out with her friend, she would at least make herself good company.

"La Traviata. Mom is very busy with the ballerinas - she put the younger ones in Traviata; they're quite a handful now. First big performance always gets to your head."

"And you're not in it?"

"No, I'm preparing for Romeo and Juliet. I'm hoping to get a major role, so I'm focusing on that one", she said, blushing slightly. "My friend, she's a soprano, she just auditioned for Violetta in Traviata. It would be so nice if we both got cast in lead roles at the same time. We always used to do everything together."

"That is so sweet. I hope you'll both get it", Amelija smiled. During her childhood, she didn't have many close friends she didn't have many close friends even now. She kept a large circle of very entertaining and respectable people around her, but aside from her sister and one cousin, she realized she never actually had someone she did everything together with.

She suddenly remembered Alina was half the world away with no intention to come back soon and felt a sudden, strong wave of sadness wash over her. It was so funny until now; she only now realized how alone she would be.

Amelija kept chatting with Meg well into the afternoon - aside from having nobody to talk to on this long trip so far, she did find Meg to be enjoyable company. Sensible, but stubborn and proud, Meg shared a lot of similar worldviews with Amelija and it made them both relieved to have someone they could talk to openly with. Meg found herself telling a lot more about herself to the foreigner than she expected; it seemed that she shared Alina's particular penchant for getting people to talk about themselves.

It continued until the girl Meg was waiting for knocked lightly on the door, smiling excitedly at them. Meg let out a tiny scream and hurried to hug her; they embraced tightly for a moment while Amelija studied the newcomer.

The other girl - seemingly a contrast to Meg; all brown curls and shyness in place of Meg's confident, serious demeanor - greeted Amelija politely and introduced herself as Christine. Meg explained this was her best friend, and they were planning to go and have tea together, but Amelija was more than

welcome to join them rather than wait for Meg's mom all alone. Amelija accepted and thanked them, looking at the other girl with interest. She was noticeably pretty - well, all the theatre girls were, but Amelija found that something was captivating about Christine's hazel-brown eyes, gentle movements, and an overall air of dreamy innocence. She probably gets a lot of unwanted attention. A withdrawn person like her must be annoyed about it all. Poor girl. At least you'll probably marry well.

"How are your wedding plans going, Christine?" Meg asked cheerfully as they walked out of the theatre and into the street.

"Everything is exhausting", Christine sighed. "You know when you're a little girl and you fantasize about getting married in some crazy setting, escaping with someone on a white horse, all romantic and spontaneous?"

"Haha, yes. We used to play like that all the time."

"Well, in real life it's a lot less like that, and a lot more organizing of tedious details of the ceremony. And rehearsing everything. My entire life is one big rehearsal right now." Christine rolled her pretty, round eyes. "But I shouldn't complain. Getting married to someone you love makes it worthwhile, even if the process is so long and exhausting, and I should be thankful for it", she added, looking slightly embarrassed.

"Will you keep performing after you're married?" Meg asked. Amelija noticed a tense note in that question underneath the casual tone it held a lot more weight than she let on.

"I talked to Raoul a few days ago", Christine smiled. "His family is not too happy about it, they say it's beneath a Vicomtesse to be seen on the stage. But he said they're mad at him already for marrying a commoner, and he doesn't care what they think, and I should do what makes me happy", she finished, beaming. "I'm so happy, Meg. I always thought I would have to choose between love and music. This is more than I could have ever asked for."

"Wonderful!" Meg jumped a little with excitement before remembering herself. "We'll still see each other!"

"Of course", Christine replied gently. "Did you think I'd forget you?"

"Well, now that you'll be a posh little lady -" Meg snickered.

"Oh, posh, there aren't enough stuck-up in-laws in the world to make me forget who I am", Christine giggled. "Even if they are quite pushy."

"You're saying that now", Meg grinned. "A few months from now, you'll be walking with your powdered nose up in the air all-important -" she stuck her head high in a wonderfully entertaining impression of a proper old lady. If anything, Meg didn't lack acting talent; Christine burst out in amused laughter.

Amelija laughed loudly along with them, reminding them she was still there.

"Sorry, we didn't mean to - that is, I know you're -" Meg fumbled.

"Don't apologize", Amelija interrupted, smiling. "That was hilarious. It was a very good impression of my great aunt. She's always ripping the clouds with her nose."

Christine giggled. "That's a good way to put it."

"It's an expression, but it's funnier in my language. Come to think of it, most offensive expressions sound much better in Croatian. I wonder what that says about us."

The girls sat down in the nearby cafe across the street - ordering tea and chatting cheerfully all the way. They had some catching up to do, and Amelija felt perfectly alright with just sitting there and listening for their stories for now - if anything, they seemed to grow more comfortable around her, at least. She shared a few anecdotes from her travels - she didn't want to seem like some stuck-up lady that only came to listen and judge them.

"Do you think you'll get the part of Violetta?" Meg asked cheerfully.

"I might, I don't know. I'm not a known name, so I don't know if I would attract audiences", Christine admitted.

"But you're so good!"

"Thank you", she blushed slightly. "Even so, if I don't get this one, at least we'll have more time together. I'll get something big soon, I'm sure of it. It doesn't have to be this particular opera - I'm in no rush. I do have to plan my wedding as well."

"At least now that he isn't around anymore", Meg scoffed. "You can do whatever you want with your time now."

"It wasn't that simple, Meg", Christine replied quietly, looking into her teacup.

"Sounds simple enough to me", Meg replied sternly. "And don't try to convince me that you haven't been happier lately. You've practically blossomed - you're going out, you're getting married, you look much livelier!"

"I have been more carefree", Christine admitted, blushing.

"Pardon me, I don't know what's going on", Amelija chimed in. "Could you give me the short version, if it's not too private?"

"Christine had a - suitor, some would say", Meg said, paying little mind to Christine opening her mouth to start telling a story - "though, more so, she had a stalker who helped her only to try and take advantage of her, but that didn't happen and now he's gone."

"Good riddance", Amelija tipped her cup at Christine. "May he rot. I wish you all the best in your marriage." She was very curious to hear what the girl herself had to say - she didn't seem at all happy with her friend speaking in her stead. You can't be another person's backbone, Meg. They'll either grow their own and fight you, or turn into mush completely. And both options are exhausting.

"No, no, that's not what happened", Christine raised her voice only slightly for the first time, furrowing her brow with a stern expression. "E- he didn't have any intention to use me. He was my music teacher, and he did teach

me to sing, for free, and asked nothing in return for it. What happened later was - more complicated", she trailed off. She suddenly looked scared.

Meg, on the other hand, looked annoyed. "And the fact you lived in absolute fear of him for six months and didn't do anything other than study? You've forgotten about that? Or that he threatened and kidnapped you in the end?"

"No, I haven't", Christine replied, her eyes glistening with anger as she remembered it. "I don't want to see him ever again. But I don't think he meant to make me miserable, and Meg, I know what you think about good intentions, but that should be said. Some people are more broken than evil. He's gone now, God knows if he's alive, so I will lose nothing by honoring at least the good things he did."

"Hmm", Amelija said. She sometimes wished her sister, over half a decade older than this girl, would have the same kind of nuanced view on things when it came to their father - even if Amelija generally shared Meg's lack of patience for difficult men and their intentions. "In any case, he's gone now, from what I've gathered? Where is he?"

"I don't know", Christine replied. "Nobody knows. He vanished a few months ago, last December. He promised never to look for me again, and then they never found him."

"Uh-huh. Who never found him?" Amelija raised her eyebrow.

"The police - after he took me, they followed him - and Meg's mom", Christine nodded at Meg. "I asked her once, Meg, sorry. She said he was gone, and that was that."

"Your mom?" Amelija turned to Meg.

"Ah, yes", Meg scoffed again with righteous fury. "She tried to talk the police - and the mob that gathered to free Christine - to let him go, some nonsense about how he's not dangerous and how she'll calm him down and how he will trust her - in the end, it was all for nothing, because nobody found him including her. That was the end of it. That reminds me, I'll go get

mom and tell her you're looking for her, I think she's just about to be done with her students", Meg rose from her chair and walked lightly towards the exit. "I'll be right back."

As Meg left, Amelija stared at Christine with what must have been scorching intensity, because the girl blushed again and cast her eyes down, unaware of what Amelija was thinking. Amelija, on the other hand, did not believe in coincidences, and the picture she was piecing together left her paralyzed and unable to make small talk. Her mind raced in circles, in absolute panic, trying to think of the best thing to do. In the end, Christine broke the silence, growing uneasy with Amelija's sudden change in demeanor.

"So, uh, how come you've come to Paris?" Christine said nervously. "Just visiting?"

"I'm here to see Antoinette Giry because my sister decided to travel suddenly across the Atlantic for reasons I don't completely understand, with a person I don't know, and Madame is the one that arranged it", she said in a flat tone, looking straight into Christine's eyes.

The pretty girl's face suddenly drained of all color, leaving a pale, ashen mask of fear beneath it.

"Oh."

"You understand that it might be important to me that I hear more of this situation."

"I - I do, but there's not much I can tell you or do about it - who is your sister?"

"Her name is Alina. She's twenty-five, and she used to work in London as a teacher. Before that, as a volunteer in an asylum."

"Does she have friends in London? Would they know she was gone?"

"Not many. But they would notice if she was just suddenly missing."

"Why did she go then? Willingly?"

"She went willingly", Amelija growled with barely-contained fury. "There is nobody who can make Alina do these things; if anything, she has always been capable of going to insane lengths to escape others' control. No, what bothers me is that she might be manipulated in some other way. Maybe they lied to her about what was going on. She always believed she could find the best in people."

"It's probably not the same person", Christine offered. "I can't imagine Erik traveling across the Atlantic on a boat with somebody - he's terrified of people, and doesn't go out in daylight, let alone talk to - "

"What did you say his name was?"

"Erik", she said, cringing almost unnoticeable.

"Erik and what else?"

"Nothing else."

Amelija decided to ignore that rubbish for now. "And how many people named Erik do you know?"

Christine sighed. "Oh good God."

"Hah."

"Have you - heard from her at all?" she asked fearfully.

"I have. She wrote to me from New York, saying everything is fine and she and this friend of hers have both found work. They're trying to make money to repair a house and something about a sick toddler. Strange stuff, but normal for Alina." Amelija shrugged. "I have to admit, I don't know what to think about it, but it sounded convincingly benevolent."

"Oh, I suppose that isn't him, then."

"No?"

"No, Erik wouldn't do things like that. I can't imagine him working a normal job, or doing any of the things you've been saying - it just wouldn't happen. And he wouldn't just start living with some unknown woman, let alone be so harmless and calm about it all."

"How are you so sure? People change."

"Oh, not Erik", Christine paused, then continued. "As I said, he doesn't - didn't go outside, especially not during daylight. He was – unstable, I don't know, but you never knew how he would react or what he might do. He never talked to people; almost nobody knew he existed." Christine, for all her anger and fear, realized this was the first time she said that out loud. Almost nobody knew he existed. She couldn't quite put a finger on why, but it made her incredibly sad.

"That sounds ridiculous. What kind of a man is he? Is he too good for this world?"

"No, no, he - alright, I suppose I can tell you since I've already told you all this - " she took a deep breath. "He's - disfigured, horribly, and wears a mask over his face. At all times. I can't imagine him around others. He was completely isolated his entire life."

"Ah, that sounds terrifying", Amelija said, remembering the little sketch of a seemingly masked man reading by candlelight in a small ship cabin that Alina sent along with her letter. "You're right, it's probably not him. Never mind. I'm sorry I made you talk about all this, and I'm glad it's over now", she said, taking her wallet out. "Listen, let's go for dinner, all three of us when Meg returns. I'll look for Madame tomorrow. Is that alright? I'll pay since you've been all too kind to offer me your lovely company in this foreign city", she smiled sweetly. I need more time to think before I act. At the very least, I'll have one more tasty dinner before I go to jail for strangling an old woman. God forgive me.

For the rest of the day, Amelija tried to focus on her meal and the company as best as she could, doing her best to seem relieved and get everybody's attention off of her while she thought in peace.

She thought about calling the police. Something would have to be done soon; she would not leave her stupid sister to die in a foreign land or have something horrible happen to her. Amelija's sibling loyalty be damned, she would tell her parents and raise hell on earth from Zagreb to New York until she got Alina back and safe where she belonged. And she would see Madame Giry go down for what she dared to put Alina through.

Madame Giry.

That woman. That manipulative... Amelija would love to simply go to the police and tell them all that she'd gathered so far, but she couldn't count on either of the girls to testify, she knew that. Meg was Giry's daughter; and when it came to Christine... Amelija had a feeling she wouldn't go against her captor. Whatever she wasn't telling her, she was either more afraid of him or more attached to him than she let on. Amelija wasn't sure which possibility sickened her more.

Tomorrow would be hard.

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Early in the morning of the next day, Amelija stood once again in front of Madame Giry's house, ringing the doorbell. She had guessed the time when Madame wouldn't have to let go to work, but would probably already be awake; her estimate was right because she heard the sound of footsteps approaching almost immediately. She waited patiently for the door to open and Antoinette to greet her, leaving a moment of silence before allowing a very cold smile to spread across her lips.

„You sent my sister across the ocean with a lunatic", she said in the sweetest voice she could do.

Antoinette felt a jolt of fear shoot through her for a second before she composed herself and merely sighed. „Do you want to come in? I'll explain."

„And why would I? I'd much rather you explain it to the police; you might be more honest with them than you were with me." Amelija still smiled

widely, not raising her voice.

Antoinette stared at the young woman on her door for a moment, fighting the urge to slam the door in her face. Amelija did have the right to know what happened to her sister, and she had the right to hear the whole story from her.

It was a risk she would have to take, even if it ruined her life. „Alright, young lady. Let me get my coat and then we'll go." She went back into the apartment, leaving the door open.

Amelija was somewhat shocked by that turn of events. She didn't have any proof and no witnesses who she thought would go against Antoinette because she didn't think this bluff would work so well. She was hoping it would only scare the woman enough to tell her the truth.

Inconvenient.

Antoinette came back, putting on her coat and hat. „I'll go to the police with you if you want, but first I want you to go somewhere else with me, and then you can decide for yourself. I'll tell you the whole goddamn story, but don't say I didn't warn you."

Amelija blinked. „Alright, but where are we going?"

„To the Opera basement."

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Once in the Opera, Antoinette went straight to the first floor, opened the secret corridor in the storage, and took the small lamp she left behind the brooms, lighting it and signaling for Amelija to follow her.

„I don't think so.", Amelija said. She did not live to be twenty-two years old because she followed unfamiliar people into dark corridors.

„Do you think I will lock you inside?" Antoinette raised her eyebrows. „I'd appeal to reason and the fact I've been taking care of your sister for years as if she was my own family, but actually, consider this. Do you think your

disappearance, after hers, is something I want to explain to your parents after they break down my door?"

That was true. Amelija sighed, really hoping she wouldn't regret this, and stepped into the corridor. It was suddenly almost completely dark as the door closed behind her, and the corridor was somehow much colder than the hallway they were just in.

„I'm afraid it will just get colder and damper as we go down", Antoinette said. „Sorry."

„I'll live." Amelija followed her down an impressively narrow flight of stairs. „This is where your little protege lived, yes? It seems fitting. I can't imagine a normal person choosing to live in this creepy nightmare."

Antoinette turned to her swiftly, her voice sharp enough to cut through a cliff.

„Little lady, has anyone told you that some people get no choice in whether they will live in dark basements or pretty residential houses?"

Amelija was shocked by this sudden display of anger, but she gathered herself quickly.

„Does that excuse what he did?"

„Does it? No. Does it mean I will let you needlessly demonize my so-friend, no, I won't. If you want the story, you'll get the whole story." Antoinette sighed. Amelija noticed the dark hallways were stone and brick, not painted or finished. Light flickered in strange ways of the stones, playing tricks on her eyes as Antoinette spoke. The absolute silence around them made her voice sound louder than normal and added an eerie echo that made Amelija feel as if her voice wasn't coming from right next to her, but from everywhere and nowhere at once. „I found Erik when he was still a boy. He was around sixteen - I think because he didn't know. He was bound and chained in a circus cage as an attraction for nearly a decade, you see. I stole him in secret and brought him here, because I had nowhere to keep

him and he couldn't talk so he couldn't take care of himself or be around other people, either."

„I... what?" Amelija wasn't sure she heard correctly.

„Yes, see, my daughter didn't tell you that part, did she? Neither did Christine because they don't know it. I have protected my daughter from growing up too fast and seeing what a hellish place this world can be. Meg's never met him in her life because I wanted to shelter her and allow her to realize things in her own time. She's a bright, principled, proud girl." She sighed. „And she might be right about all of this, in the end."

„I see. And you have gambled my sister's life on her being wrong?"

„No, no. Alina is in no danger."

„And you know this, how?" Amelija raised an eyebrow. She wondered how deep they already were. These corridors seemed to go on forever; she felt as if she might choke from the weight of all the ground above them.

„Erik lived in here for eleven years before he met Christine", Antoinette said. „During those eleven years, he never harmed anybody. The worst thing he did was steal some wood to build his house."

„House?"

„We'll get to it. Be patient. In any case, I'll be completely honest with you. Erik was insane when I met him, as one would be after living their childhood the way he had. But he started speaking within a year – look, he knew how to speak, he just couldn't, I can't explain it – and once he did, I made it my responsibility to raise him as one would a normal boy. Well, as much as I could. But you would be surprised. Do you see these?" she pointed at one of the traps.

„No?" Amelija squinted.

„It's a trap. He set them all over this corridor so that nobody could find him or get to him. He was so terrified of people that he would have simply

planted landmines if it were up to him. But I asked him to make them not dangerous, and I checked if they were lethal. They're not."

„That's a low standard for goodness."

„Perhaps. What I was saying is, once Erik calmed down and started speaking to me, I found that he was a... boy like any other, and he grew up to be a man like any other. Obvious peculiarities aside. He built a house, the one around this here corner, and lived in it. He listened to music, composing music, read books, and talked to me like I was his – here we are."

Antoinette held up her lamp high above her head for Amelija to see.

What Amelija saw must have been a house at some point – and a beautifully, carefully made one, at that – but right now it was a giant mess of partially charred wood. It looked like someone went at it with an ax, and some torches, and... Antoinette led her closer. Amelija looked at the broken, burned, and scattered remains around her until she started to make out shapes.

Paper, with scribbles and notes and sketches. A broken piano that someone hatcheted up until the only recognizable pieces were the keys. Some kind of clothes, all black, shoved violently out of a closet. Closet with etchings on it, Amelija noticed, that still showed in some spots. Various other things – enough to fill a house with one resident – lay around broken, ruined, and very obviously violated. This was not just about breaking down the door or forcing a man out, she realized. It was about destroying everything the resident of the house held dear.

In the middle of one of the piles, she saw a violin broken in half.

„You probably know what happened with Christine", Antoinette said, looking away from the violin, „and I won't try to defend that. The poor girl was eighteen when it all transpired, and I can't bring myself to blame her for fearing him or lying to him, because she didn't know how to talk to him, or even for some of the things she did to him – it wasn't her fault. She meant well, but things spiraled completely out of control.

But in the end, Erik did love her, and he did let her go on his own. He let them both leave, ran from this place, and – well, all of this occurred later on. They wanted to send a message, I suppose. This was the only home he ever had, and this is what's left of it. The reason I think he deserved another chance is that I saw him live in relative peace for a decade, and even when he did break and do all of that – he still brought himself from the brink and learned a lesson. I think he did learn a lesson, at least."

Amelija needed some time to process that, but before that, she had one more pressing issue.

„Alright. Suppose that he did deserve another chance at life. Suppose that this was all a horrible mistake of a man that didn't know better. Why would you send my sister, who you've been protecting all her life, with a man that doesn't know better?"

„I asked your sister to get him to New York and somewhere he wouldn't be in danger", Antoinette said. „If she's still there, it's purely her own choice. I'm not keeping her in any way."

„Is he?"

„No."

„How do you know? Doesn't he have a sort of history of kidnapping women?"

„I doubt he would do that again."

„Why?" Amelija pressed. „You can't risk my sister's life on a hunch!"

„Because", Antoinette took a deep breath, „because he's... he spent his entire life imprisoned, and after... everything, when he realized he was capable of imprisoning someone else, I had to physically constrain him not to kill himself."
„Excuse me?"

„I don't want to talk about it. In any case, I asked your sister to go with him because she was depressed in London and because I know she doesn't have prejudice toward people. She had worked with enough... unstable people, to know how to talk to him. I warned her that he was... strange, and not to pry too much into things that upset him, and not to... just to respect his privacy and not do things you wouldn't do around someone who, for example, just came home from war."

„Why has she stayed for so long?" Amelija wondered. Was it her sister's overgrown, bleeding heart that made her stay with the poor traumatized madman? Well, it was a possibility.

„Oh, because she likes him."

„Pardon me?" Amelija managed.

„I introduced them before they left, for convenience. Your sister gets along well with Erik, as much as one can, after knowing him for a short while. I didn't expect him to talk to her at all, but he did, and your sister seems to find him interesting. I think they've become friends by now, judging by both their letters."

„Uh-huh."

„Are you surprised? Alina craves strange adventures and strange people. And to be fair, Erik is interesting. I think they'll have enough to talk about; they're more alike than it seems at first."

Amelija didn't know what to say to that.

„I think we should go", Antoinette said, leading her back up. „Alina has been sending back letters, and she seems content with the situation. If she wanted to come back, I would very much help her with that. In any case, it's your choice what you will tell your parents and the police – but
you have been getting her letters, no?"

„Just one so far, since she arrived."
„And how did it sound to you?"

„In all honesty, like she was finally finding her place in the world", Amelija admitted. She spent the rest of the way up in thoughtful silence.

„Alright", she said when they reached the ground level, „suppose I do believe you."

„You do?" Antoinette raised an eyebrow, feeling more relieved than she let on.

„I don't know. But Alina is an adult, she's not held against her will and she's smart enough to handle this strange refugee of yours. I'd say she's doing alright so far, from what I've heard."

„Ah."

„I still would like to see how it all unravels", Amelija admitted. „I'd like to see her. And him. I'd like to visit them both and see for myself, so I can let the matter rest in peace. I won't tell anything to mom and dad, because I'm not a snitch, but I need to know for sure that snitching isn't the lesser evil in this case."

„So, you're going to America as well?" Antoinette asked. „Maybe you should wait until they settle down first? I think they're sort of... in the process of finding a decent home right now."

„Not this year, no. I have some things to do, and... some money to save up first", she admitted.

„I also do have to admit, since I'm being honest", Antoinette said, „Erik is still quite unstable. He's frightened of unfamiliar people, even if it doesn't seem that way. Adjusting to Alina's presence will take a while for him. If you force too many people on him, it might get complicated and he'll simply disappear. He does strange nonsense under extreme stress."

„Thank you for your honesty", Amelija said, surprised by the sudden confession. It was unnecessary and unfavorable for Antoinette – which made Amelija trust her more for the first time today. „I assure you I'll handle it as delicately as I can."

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March 1895, Coney Island

Present day

„Oh", Alina looked up from the letter in her hands. „My sister is coming to visit us this summer. She'll stay for a few weeks, and then she might go to Pennsylvania."

„Us?" Erik kept his voice politely curious.

„She's coming to visit me, if you want to be exact, but also to meet you. I'm not certain if she's simply curious and wants to travel, or if my parents sent her to spy on me, but in any case, she should be coming alone", Alina trailed off, absentmindedly. She started biting her nails, he noticed, as she usually did when she talked about her family.

„Implying that she will be staying here as well?" he asked.

„Oh, that. Yes." She shook her head slightly, gathering her thoughts. „I'm sorry. Do you mind if she stays here?"

I do very much mind. „I'm not used to being around that many people", he shrugged.

„Two?" she raised her eyebrow.

„Even one is too much in most cases. You're an exception", he smiled, „but only because you're so lovely. In any case, this is your apartment as well as mine. If you don't want your sister to stay somewhere else, that's reasonable, I suppose. And safer."

„Oh", Alina straightened up. This was going much better than she'd anticipated. „That's... very nice! You'll like her. We'll all have a good time together. Amelija is very fun. And, to be fair, lovelier than – „

„You misunderstood me. I won't be here."

„Pardon me?"

„I'll find somewhere else to be. Work, probably. I'll see if I'll sleep in my room, but I doubt it." Erik thought he could see clouds rolling up behind Alina's eyes. „I'll meet your sister if you want, but I don't want to live with her. I'll find someplace else to be while she's here." It was as fair of a compromise as he could manage; a small, bitter part of him complained about being kicked out of his own house for the sake of some woman he didn't know or care about – but he tried his best to be considerate.

„I'm not kicking you out of your apartment!" Alina wasn't sure if she felt angry, guilty, or simply frustrated. „I thought we could all – „

„Get along?" Erik finished coldly. „No, we cannot. I'm trying to be considerate and let you spend some time with your sister in peace because you seem to love her a great deal. But I don't want to spend several weeks walking on eggshells, pretending to be normal and not sleeping so she wouldn't hear me so- I'm not doing it, and that's that." He crossed his arms in front of him, his eyes burning in contrast with his cold, flat tone. Alina had seen him angry before, but she wasn't scared of it anymore, he suddenly realized. At least she didn't look scared. Maybe all of this incredibly exhausting, constant self-vigilance has been worth it, at least a little? Maybe there will be a person I know other than Antoinette that never looks at me with horror again?

Alina knew the right and wrong times to push things. „Thank you for being considerate. I haven't seen Amelija in almost two years. It will mean a great deal to me", she finished, slowly.

Erik shrugged. „If it makes you happy."

She wondered if she should say the following sentence, but for some of the self-control Erik had gained over the years, she was slowly losing the excess she had previously accumulated.

„I want you to meet my sister because I'm proud of you and proud to be with you, and she has never actually seen me with a man I cared about", her brows furrowed with defiance. It would be incredible if he took this

opportunity to confess he's not serious about me. „If she is moved by your appearance or whatever peculiar behavior you feel insecure about, more than the fact that you're an incredible man, it would mean she's much dumber than I remember her. And I doubt it."

Erik was truly struggling to stay annoyed. He kept staring at her, but she couldn't read his face anymore. „You've never cared about a man? And you care about me?"

„Yes. I do."

„You have a terrible taste", he blurted out.

„I'm beginning to think that too, after how that was received", Alina rubbed her face with her hands. She stood up, automatically looking for something to do; she gathered the dishes from the table and faced away from him to carry them off to the kitchen.

Erik stood up frantically after her, moving in front of her and taking the dishes from her hands to gently lay them back on the table.

„I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry", he repeated, his voice panicked. „I didn't expect you to say that." Alina still looked hurt; he took her hands in his. „I'm sorry!"

„It's alright", she looked at him with concern, unsure what was going on. „I'm not angry."

„But – I – I didn't mean to say that! I meant –„ he took a deep breath, trying not to make a fool of himself anymore, „I meant to say that I care about you too, but I'm – honestly surprised that you do, and I don't – don't deserve it because as soon as you said it now, I've managed to offend you instead –„

Alina pulled one of her hands out of his grasp, gently resting a finger over his mouth.

„I'm not angry."

„I've ruined it", he said, albeit a little calmer. The feeling of her soft finger on his lips seemed to center and ground his thoughts; if he focused on the sensation, he could let his worries pass by without escalating... Please don't start resenting me. If I told someone I cared about them and they reacted as I did, I would start resenting them.

„Nothing is ruined", she said, wrapping her arms around his neck. „I'm not angry." Erik returned her embrace, slowly putting his arms around her and burying his face in her hair. Alina closed her eyes and smiled. There was something very special in the way Erik hugged her; something incredibly warm and desperate at the same time – as if he was trying to be as close to her as possible, grasping at her for dear life, as if every time he touched her was some strange gift from heavens. She couldn't get enough of it.

„If you were, you'd tell me?" he asked quietly, after some hesitation. „You wouldn't just resent me in secret?"

„Yes. I promise. You don't have to worry about that."

Chapter 16:Nightmares

September 1893, Paris

Christine stood in the dark corridor on the first floor of the Opera that ended in nothing, wondering about the reason her heart was beating so frantically. She waited patiently, leaned on the wall, until the wall moved for seemingly no reason and she stumbled, falling into another pitch-black corridor. She held herself steady with her hand on the wall, blinking in the suddenly biting cold that made her eyes water.

„Are you here? Where are you?" she asked, her voice slightly trembling.

„Right here. Next to you", the voice came from somewhere close, but the weird echo made it sound like it was coming from everywhere at once. She turned around, holding out her hands to try and feel her surroundings. He could sense it; the sudden movement of her hands waving much too close to his chest nearly stopped his heart – from fear or excitement? – and he stepped back, trying to compose himself.

„Don't do that", the voice hissed at Christine.

She quickly put her hands down.

„Just walk. It's safe. I'll tell you where to go", he said. Christine wished he would offer his hand to her so she wouldn't have to just walk blindly; if only to calm her down – she felt incredibly unsure walking through the darkness with nothing to hold on to.

Erik could barely see Christine tapping in the darkness slowly; she passed a crack in the wall that let a tiny sliver of light through, illuminating her shiny dark curls for a split second – it was such low light that she barely

perceived it, but for a moment he could see her lovely eyes wide with fright.

„So you came", he said. „Why?"

„I read your note", she replied. The small note on her desk instructed her to come to the southern corridor of the first floor – after talking to a disembodied voice in her room for nearly three months, she had started to pester him regularly to come and meet her properly. This was not what she had imagined.

„You don't want to be here", he said. He tried to sound as calm as possible, but some of the bitterness still seeped through.

„No", she admitted after a short pause. „This corridor is creepy. And cold."

„Then go back", he said flatly.

„But – „ she started, unsure, „I wanted to meet you."

„This is me", he said. „Are you disappointed?"

„I thought you'd come... I thought I'd see you", she said, trying to sound confident. „I wanted to see you."

I'm afraid seeing me won't make this any less creepy, he thought. „No."

„What am I to do, then? Walk blindly through the cellars?" she asked. The tiny note of annoyance in her voice amplified as it echoed through the corridor. He kept silent for a moment.

She's afraid. She hasn't even been down yet, she hasn't even seen you, and she's afraid. Do you think it'll get better as she goes down? How much more fear can you stand to see on her face?

He wasn't sure if he wanted to cry or scream, but he somehow managed to do neither of those; however, restraining himself and the voices in his head took too much of his composure and left him unwilling and unable to talk to

her anymore. He just wanted to be alone. He rubbed at his temples, trying to compose a normal-sounding sentence.

„Go back", he said.

„What?" she asked, „No, wait, I – „

I'm sorry, she wanted to say, but the door behind her opened again. She turned around, confused by the sound, and tried to make out his shape in the shadows cast by the sudden light outside.

„Wait!" she said, but nobody answered. „I'm sorry if I offended you! What did I say? Why are you angry at me?" Christine was normally incredibly well-behaved and obedient towards all of her teachers; she didn't normally backtalk them or question the tasks they gave her, and she acted the same towards her mysterious singing tutor as well – but walking blind through creepy, pitch-black, haunted cellars was too much even for her. She wondered if this was her fault, and if she should be more respectful next time – she had offended him somehow. He had been nothing but polite to her until this point. Her plea met only unforgiving silence, and she turned around and walked back into the light of day.

Erik watched her from a distance, invisible to her unaccustomed eyes. This was for the best, he told himself, even if it tore him apart to do it.

As Christine returned to her dressing room, she found new sheet music on her desk, along with a note.

This will be good for your vocal range. Make sure you practice the scales too, I know you've been skipping out on them. You'll only ruin your voice if you keep being careless. Read them and I'll contact you in a few days.

The paper was ripped on the bottom of the note, and Christine didn't think much of it as she picked up the new songs excitedly. Her teacher must have forgiven her after all, she thought as she opened the sheet music and started warming up.

Several floors below, Erik absentmindedly played with the ripped piece of paper as he thought about what he was going to do. He needed more distance from her; his heart was still racing and his nerves felt like frayed threads. He opened the piece of paper in his hand and looked at it again. He had almost left it like that, before changing his mind and ripping the bottom from his letter. It sounded incredibly stupid, now that he looked at it again.

I'm sorry. You can come back if you want.

ooo

November 1893; Paris

Christine closed the door to her room and locked it carefully. She leaned her forehead on the door and breathed deeply, trying to calm her pounding heart down.

It was finally happening. Her dreams just might come true. She opened her eyes, realizing she could suddenly sense – in some way she couldn't explain – that she wasn't alone.

„Erik?"

„I'm here", she heard a voice behind her. She turned around to see a figure behind her, standing in the corner of the room with his hands behind his back. As usual, he was completely covered in clothing, the high collar of his coat ending just below the edge of his mask, the only thing on him that wasn't completely black. His hair was neatly tied in the back, and his eyes – a very bright, yellow color – were softer and kinder than usual, losing some of their unnerving intensity. She had seen glimpses of his appearance here and there when they would meet, but never like this – he had fulfilled his promise to come in person this time.

„I promised to come if you auditioned, so here I am", he said. He had rehearsed that sentence so many times that it no longer held even a tiny note of insecurity – at least not obvious enough that she would notice it.

„And yet, you're still hiding behind the mask", she remarked. „Why won't you tell me who you are?"

He kept silent, considering going back down after all.

„I apologize, maestro", she bowed charmingly, uncharacteristically bold now while the adrenaline was still coursing through her veins. „You may keep your mysteries."

He forced himself to calm down. „In any case, I just came here to congratulate you."

„You heard all of that?" she gasped at him, her eyes twinkling with some new light in them.

„Of course."

She laughed a charming laugh that sounded like a thousand tiny bells – he wondered if she was aware of how much different her laugh sounded today from when he first saw her.

„You were incredible", he bowed his head at her. „Congratulations. You just got your first leading role."

She clasped her hands over her mouth. „I can't believe it! What am I going to do?"

„Sing, obviously", he replied. „Isn't this what we've been preparing for?"

„I'm not – „

„You're ready", he interrupted. „They'll adore you."

„You think so?" she said. „You think they'll notice me, next to all the beautiful soloists?" do you think he will notice me, she almost asked but stopped herself. She didn't feel it was appropriate to discuss her secret love for a young nobleman who barely noticed her with her music teacher.

„On the contrary, I couldn't notice anyone else when you were on the stage", he blurted out. He didn't mean to say it. It was stupid, so stupid, he fumbled and wished he could disappear, but she suddenly smiled at him with such sincere brilliance he felt his chest melting from the inside.

„I'm so glad you liked it!" she said. „I'm so glad it's finally good enough!"

„Almost", he pointed out. „We'll polish some details."

„Now?" she asked. „I'm... I'm kind of tired, and... Meg is waiting for me..."

„Do you have better things to do?" he asked coldly.

„Well.. no..." she trailed off. She did have things she wanted to do, but she was worried she would seem lazy. What did she know about how real musicians worked? Maybe she needed to put in some more sacrifice to make her ambitions come true.

„It won't take long. I don't want you to strain too much. We'll just go over some details", Erik took out some sheet music. He automatically took off his gloves and set them aside, as he normally did when he was alone. He didn't even realize he had done it until he noticed her staring at his hands in shock.

„What's wrong with your hands?" she asked, wide-eyed. His fingers were bruised with dry blood stuck in the cracked fingernails. She wondered how on earth it wasn't causing him pain.

„Nothing", he hissed, hiding them behind his back and turning to put back his gloves. „My hands, if anything, are perfectly normal." Well, usually, at least. He was so obsessed with making every part of Christine's lessons perfect that the obsessiveness, once he stopped checking himself as Antoinette taught him, spilled over into everything else he did. When he wasn't obsessively practicing things he would teach Christine, what exactly he would say to her and how and when, what he would play for her and when he would see her, he was obsessively playing his violin to try and keep grounded in reality. It wasn't doing much for him, even as he lied to

himself that it would get better in time. The results were becoming visible on his body.

„You're injured", she said quietly. She felt the need to reach out her hand to him but was too afraid to do it.

„Nothing for you to worry about. We have more work to do", he said. „Don't let this one audition get to your head. You've got a long way to go if you truly want to reach greatness."

„As you say", she nodded.

„Start from the top of the page, then. Here, you'll need to add some accents", he pointed with his gloved finger, determined not to slip like this ever again.

ooo

December 1893; Paris

Christine looked at the broken mess of a man she once considered her friend, tears streaming down his massacred face, and realized she no longer felt any of her previous admiration, any of her dying need to please him and be good enough for him. He dragged her by her arm down, not stopping when she stumbled in the dark, not turning to ask if she was alright – just pressing on, rambling furiously some disconnected nonsense she couldn't decipher. He pushed her into his house, locking the door behind them and turning to her. The horrible misery on his face was slowly being replaced by something else. She couldn't tell what that emotion was. It didn't seem like something a human being would be capable of feeling. Christine backed away until her back met the wall; the movements of his limbs looked like branches being swayed carelessly by the wind as he walked towards her and stopped only a few feet away from her.

She wished she could just simply kill him, or even herself, and end this hell. She couldn't look at her teacher – friend – protector – become this...

„Let me go!" she demanded.

„No", he said flatly. Or somebody said it. Something must have produced that sound - even if the eerie mannequin-like presence in front of her looked unable to form normal human words.

„Then let me die!" she raised her voice desperately.

„No", he repeated. His fingers twitched and trembled unnaturally; she wondered if he was trying to stop himself from doing something.

„What do you want from me, then?" her pleas were getting more frantic.

„I want nothing from you", he said and thought about it for a second. „No. That is wrong. I want everything. I want you."

She stared at him in horror for a moment, unable to form a sentence strong enough to express how much she hated him. Instead, she said the first thing that came to her without thinking.

„I am not a doll for you to possess!"

„I don't want a doll", he said, seemingly having lost his capacity to understand figures of speech. His shoulders started twitching as well. „I want you", he said quietly, with sudden unexpected gentleness.

„You – you can't have me!" she screamed. „I'll fight you, now and every day until I die! I'll go to hell cursing your name, you unforgivable monster! I'd rather die than stay trapped here!"

„Understandable", he said, his tone becoming empty again. The twitching was becoming worse. „It's what I would have done as well if I could."

She stared at him frozen for a moment.

„Unfortunately, I couldn't do that, and neither can you", he said. „So now we're both stuck here."

„Why? Why are you doing this?" she started crying openly, burying her face in her hands.

He thought about it for a moment. „To keep you here with me", he said finally. He thought it would be obvious to her. It was obvious even to him, even with the myriad of voices that screamed and hissed and echoed in his mind, stopping him from thinking clearly.

„Wh- why? Why? Why? Can't you just let me live in peace? Does it not matter to you at all what I want?" she desperately hoped she could find a way to reach somehow behind this pointless, circular argument.

„It does. What do you want? I tried to give you everything you wanted." the twitching of his arms calmed a little bit, and he pressed his fingers to his temples to try and protect himself from the hateful voices – both inside and outside his head.

„I want to be freed-„ she started and stopped as she heard loud banging on the door. He raised his head to look at her again, and the terror she felt was for a moment reflected in his eyes before mindless fury took its place.

He was over at the door before she could even blink, and opened it in one swift motion to reveal the tall handsome man standing behind it – the man didn't expect the door to open so soon, and certainly didn't expect the punch that landed in his stomach and took out his breath, leaving him hunched over to gasp for air. The next one came from below and sent him crumbling to his knees. Another one sent him flying until he was lying on the floor, rope tightening around his wrists and neck. He didn't even have a chance to say a word before it was done.

„Please, please, stop", Christine cried. „Please, don't hurt him. Don't kill him. I'll do anything you want."

„He'll come back when I'm not looking", the shell echoed with Erik's voice. „He'll kill me."

„He won't! I promise! Just leave him! He's not dangerous!"

Erik's head turned to the man gasping unmovingly on the floor, then to the crying girl again, and the ghost inside him proposed an idea.

„If you stay here with me, I'll let him go", it said. „If you don't, I'll kill him."

Christine's head cleared, filling with sharp anger instead of panic as she realized she'd walked right into a trap. From now on, nothing she did would matter. No matter what she did, she would not win this. Raoul looked at her with pleading eyes, mouthing „don't do this, let me die, it's fine, don't do this„ over and over again. He had promised Madame Giry he would try to calm him down before he did anything else; he couldn't believe he failed so spectacularly before he had a chance to even say anything and kept silent, afraid to let out another word that would make it all worse.

„I trusted you", she screamed. „I – I thought you were my friend! I thought – „

„You were wrong", the ghost said with sudden sadness in his voice. „I lied."

„You said you loved me!"

„I do." Again, it seemed obvious. Why was she checking? As if it had changed in the meantime?

„You can't force me to love you back!" she screamed, giving up the hope that she would find a better way to say it. „Even if I wanted to, I couldn't! I can't! I love him! You can't change that!" she lost her voice again, and the last remnants of her anger, and simply stood there crying.

„I know that", he said. The twitching was intensifying again. „I just want you to stay here. I'd be stupid to hope you'd love me back. I'm not even – not even – even – h – h - " he stopped, closing his eyes and putting his hands on his head again, pulling on his long disheveled hair.

Christine watched in terror as it happened, unable to understand what was going on. A few more tears streamed down his face, and he forced himself to open his eyes and look at her.

„You have to decide", the ghost repeated.

She blinked at him. She knew already what she would do – the only thing she could do – but something still bothered her. An eternity of darkness was a long time, and she had one more moment to ask before she took the jump.

„What are you, then?" she asked numbly. She had no idea what she was asking or why.

His eyes looked back at her. What did it matter, anyway? The deal was still here. It would be here no matter what she said. He struggled to think about it.„ I am a hole in the ground", he said. „I'm nothing. Black spots and screaming. And sharp. I was something else, but I can't remember."

She nodded. It sounded about right. The hole demanded a sacrifice, and she would oblige. Maybe she would find Erik at the bottom of it when she jumped in. Hopefully.

She cast another glance at Raoul who was still mouthing the same silent mantra – don't do it, don't do it, save yourself – and gathered her courage. Very slowly, she closed the distance between her and the ghost as he watched her carefully and stood so close to him that she could see the tears on the mangled skin of his cheeks even in the dim light. She closed her eyes, whispering „I'll stay, then", and kissed him lightly on the lips. She had to stand on her toes to reach him, even as he was already hunched over her. She didn't dare touch any other part of him, as he was already starting to shake when she drew closer.

When she pulled away and opened her eyes, he was still staring at her.

She looked at him expectantly for a moment when she realized the twitching had stopped.

His eyes widened, some new humanity emerging from deep within them.

And then he started to cry.

He cried silently as he kneeled and untied Raoul, throwing the ropes away, and he cried as he cast another glance at her, moving past her, stumbling

back toward his house. She tried following him, but he turned around and waved his hand at her to stop.

„Go back", he said. She remembered the first time she heard him say it, in the dark corridors.

„What?"

„You're free", he repeated. „Go back, now."

Raoul stood up behind her. He was still unstable on his feet, but he didn't look too injured to walk. She hurried to help him to his feet and he hugged her frantically, whispering to hurry as his throat was still too coarse to speak properly. She turned back to Erik, who was still watching her. Even so, she could see he was still hoping she would stay, and for a moment her anger was gone. Asking Raoul to wait for a moment, she walked up to him, took his hand as he almost winced back, and placed a small ring in his palm.

„You were Erik", she said. „Before the hole swallowed you. I have to go now."

„Forget me", he told her before turning around and disappearing into the shadows.

I won't, she thought. She turned around and walked away with Raoul at her side. Neither of them could bear to look back.

ooo

Alina heard rustling from Erik's room as he jerked around in his sleep - his nightmares were a lot less frequent lately, but he'd still get them occasionally and she would hear him mutter or yell in his sleep. He appeared to be waking up; she heard something that could have been a gasp and someone standing up suddenly. He burst out of his room, his hair disheveled, his face unmasked, and generally looking like he was having a rough night. He saw Alina's face in the candlelight looking back at him as he entered the room and jerked suddenly, covering his face with his hands and turning back into the room.

"Goddammit, Alina", he said, looking for his mask. "Why are you here?"

"I live here", she raised an eyebrow, her gaze fixed on her papers. Erik emerged again, tying the string at the back of his head.

"I thought you would be asleep", he said. "I didn't hear your door opening."

"I never went to sleep", she said. "I'm working." She almost asked him if he was alright, but decided to wait for a bit and see how he would act. He was generally distressed and distanced after waking up from his nightmares; he didn't react well to either comforting or questioning.

"Sorry about this", he said, waving a hand toward his face. He crossed over to the sink and poured himself a glass of water.

"I have no idea what you're apologizing for", she said lazily without looking up from her work.

Erik decided not to argue for a change. He leaned on the sink, glancing over her shoulder. "What are you doing?"

"Come and take a look", she smiled. Erik stepped closer and leaned over her.

"It's a new project. We're going to make a little garden for the school, and the kids will take care of it. It might be fun for them, to spend time outside together. And it teaches responsibility, too. But I have to plan it thoroughly before I suggest it to Dowling because I doubt he would want to bother with the logistics of it all. I'm just going to show up with a finished plan that needs approval."

"Don't you have work in the morning? You'll be tired."

"It's Sunday tomorrow", she raised her head to look at him.

"Oh." He was engulfed in his composing these days; he had trouble keeping track of time. He couldn't remember when he'd even fallen asleep - he must have been sleeping already when Alina came home. He vaguely remembered collapsing on his bed to take a quick nap when it was still

sunny outside. Have I slept that long? When was the last time I slept? What time is it?

"It's one in the morning, so not that late", Alina said. "I'll go to sleep soon anyway."

"How long have you been home?" he sat next to her, looking at her scribbles and sketches. It was a welcome distraction; he could feel his thoughts untangling back to normal.

"Since about five. I went to Yana, and when I returned you were sleeping, so I decided to do some work in advance", she said. After a moment's hesitation, she reached out to kiss his temple lightly, right by his ear. Erik nearly twitched back automatically but consciously stopped himself, closing his eyes. He felt his skin tingling after she pulled away; he focused on the tapping of his fingers on the glass. Alina continued her work, seemingly undisturbed.

"How much of that did you hear?" He asked quietly.

"Hm. Some of it, but I didn't understand", she replied, still scribbling.

He sighed in frustration. "I need better doors."

"They're becoming less frequent", she said casually.

"Yes."

"I'm glad for you."

"Mh."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" She asked carefully, checking at her sketches. Do you need someone to carry all these eggshells? I'm qualified enough; I've had a lot of practice.

"No", he replied. "It's just nightmares."

"Alright."

"I'm a grown man, I don't need pity", he blurted out.

"I wouldn't dream of offering it", she folded her papers neatly. "I'm offering support, which is not at all the same. And I'm very aware that you're a grown man, as you know", she winked. She crossed her arms on the table and rested her head on top, looking at him.

It didn't seem to reassure him much. He kept silent for a few moments before quickly blurting out,

"You know you could be with someone less of a freak, right?"

Alina frowned a little, thinking. "Is that someone, not you?"

"Obviously."

"Then I'll pass."

"But why?" he contained his voice, but it still held a tiny bit more of a pleading note than he would have liked.

"Because I have been a bitter old spinster, as my sister kindly put it, for twenty-six years, and I'd rather go back to that than be with someone else." He opened his mouth but she continued quickly, "I think you're incredible and I have never felt such a need to spend all my time with another man in my life. Does that answer your question?"

He nodded.

"Should I elaborate? Do you want more compliments?"

He chuckled. "I wouldn't protest."

"Hmmm." she smiled suddenly, thinking of something. "But they'll come with a price."

"Price?"

"You have to buy them. With kisses. One for each compliment", she grinned, her ears blushing slightly. "I'm sure we can come to a bargain."

Erik thought about it for a second and then nudged her arm unwrapping it from under her. He took it lightly and kissed the palm of her hand.

"You're very witty. You make me laugh a lot", she said.

"That I've noticed", he said, carefully rolling up her sleeve. He planted another kiss on her wrist. "It's intentional. I enjoy the sound."

"You're a very kind, gentle man", she continued.

"Not a lot of people would say that about me", he admitted, tracing small circles along her forearm. Alina felt the tiny hairs on her arm standing on their ends.

"I don't care. It's not them you're kissing."

"Good point", he reached out, planting another light kiss on her cheek. When he pulled away, he noticed a slight blush there, even in the dim candlelight.

"You're a brilliant musician", Alina said. "Your music would make a stone cliff weep."

"Many other things about me would", he remarked.

"You need to stop ruining the game."

"Sorry."

He looked at her for a moment, trying to decide, then leaned toward her again and kissed the side of her neck. He heard her sigh – oh God, what a wonderful sound, please do that again – it made his heart beat frantically; instead of pulling away, he kissed her neck again, slightly lower than before.

"You're a great kisser", she whispered.

"And you are the best thing that has ever happened to me", he replied into her neck. Alina's limbs felt like rubber already; she wondered if she would simply melt then and there. But having heard that, she felt a little jolt of energy, and she lifted her head to face him.

"Are we switching? I can play that way too."

"Wh-"

She silenced him by abruptly sitting on his lap and crashing her lips against his. Before he could react, he felt her hands around his neck, in his hair, gently flowing down his back and chest. He closed his eyes, wrapping his arms tightly around her, as his head cleared completely. He didn't notice when the candle burned out.

Chapter 17:Masquerade

December 1891, Paris

(Two years before the Opera Ghost scandal)

Opera Garnier took pride not only in the quality and abundance of its performances but also in the lavish, glamorous balls and parties that it often hosted during the holiday season. Antoinette enjoyed those events, and even though maintaining her professional authority meant she couldn't completely relax she could still be around people and talk about something other than work. Today was one of those days - the annual masked ball that took place three weeks before Christmas was tonight, and Antoinette found that one to be her favorite, if only for the dressing up and glamour of pretending. Antoinette had always loved extravagant dresses - her current lifestyle didn't allow for them very often, but every once in a while she could take out the black lace and pearls and silk gloves and let her imagination run wild. She was thankful for the fact that at forty-five years of age with a job and a daughter, she would be free to do this one silly thing in the middle of what was the most exhausting time of the year for her.

She entered the grand hall in her beautiful, extravagant black dress, shiny golden mask over the top half of her face, and a dainty matching golden crown on her head. She wrapped her shoulders in a transparent black shawl to keep warm. Standing straight with a slight smile, she looked positively imposing. She remembered going to these balls as a young ballerina - trying to look small, pretty, feminine; trying not to stand out too much and fearing others' judgment.

The young Antoinette, although prettier, really didn't know what she was missing out on. She wouldn't go back to that for the world.

The building was lavishly decorated in red, black, and gold, and lit in warm low light in such a way as to make it easy enough to get around, but casting deep shadows that played tricks on one's eyes sometimes, especially when everyone was wearing masks. The experience was only slightly surreal and uncanny - just enough to make the party interesting. She liked the idea. Everyone was affected by it - every person Antoinette talked to seemed to be slightly different than how they normally were; the strange light and mood made them talk slightly more openly, admit strange things they normally wouldn't, and tell eerie stories about things they've seen. It seemed like a dream one would have under the full moon.

After some time, Antoinette decided she could use some fresh air and stepped out on one of the small balconies to avoid having to socialize for a few minutes. She was afraid for a moment she'd run into one of those couples, but she seemed to be strangely lucky because the tiny balcony seemed empty. She let out a breath and looked at the clear, starry sky.

"Hello, Antoinette", she heard a voice behind her - barely above a whisper, but her ears were used to its shy beckoning so she recognized it immediately. That voice had no business being there, and she turned around quickly to see what was going on.

"Erik?" she looked at a tall narrow figure standing right behind her. She had not heard him approach at all, and even if she had seen him she would not have noticed him - his appearance was carefully planned to make him stand out as little as possible, and his soft, quick movements kept him in others' peripheral vision without calling for further attention. He looked the same as he usually did - dressed in black, white mask and long black hair neatly tied in the back, but for once, nobody thought that was the slightest bit strange.

He smiled shyly at her. "Surprised to see me?"

"Absolutely." it was not like him to come out like this at all; the crowd was huge, and the room behind them that he would have to cross to get here was loud and filled with laughter, bright lights, and colors. Even Antoinette would be overwhelmed after a few hours.

"To be fair, you're the one who has been avoiding me this time", he bowed his head slightly.

"I wasn't avoiding you, I just saw you last - " she frowned, before thinking about it and realizing he was not being paranoid again - over the last year she had indeed started visiting him less frequently. "Oh."

"I wasn't sure what to think about it, but I figured - if it was some other man, the smart thing to do would be to ask you what's wrong", he shrugged. "If you don't want me here, I'll go."

"No, no, don't go", she waved her hands at him. "I'm sorry! I have been busy. We had a hellish year here, and - Meg is also dancing now, and I need to help her - and - another girl came and she's an orphan so we have to take care of her - "

"It's fine." he didn't consider how uncomfortable he would feel once she started apologizing.

"No! I have not been avoiding you. And I'm sorry. I'll visit more often", she said, feeling the intense, gnawing pain of guilt in her stomach. Erik was old enough now - probably around twenty-five - that he didn't need her company in the same way he needed it before. He seemed to be doing alright on his own; he was in a good mood most of the time she saw him and she found herself automatically shifting her focus on the younger, needier kids that were under her care.

Antoinette, you ass, she thought. He's your friend. The one real friend in this place you have. How many mothers can say their adult sons come to visit them and chat every so often?

"If you have the time." Erik would not have come to seek her out if he wasn't reasonably sure she didn't start hating him; he took his time over several weeks to follow her around while she was working and he got the impression that she, honestly, barely had time to breathe. Aside from her normal duties, she did have a lot of work with the younger Opera employees that her superiors left her in care of. One evening he was passing her room on the first floor when he heard quiet sobbing. When he peeked

through the keyhole he saw Antoinette comforting a young, miserable-looking curly-haired girl who seemed to be crying about someone's death. He considered leaving Antoinette alone after that - certainly, there were better people she could spend the precious little free time she had with, but in the end, he found himself seeking her out anyway.

He missed her terribly.

"I'll find the time", she hurried. "there is always time for good friends. But how come you're here? You could have just left me a note."

"I… like this masquerade", he looked around, shifting uncomfortably. He was not immune to the strange atmosphere. "I've never been to any parties before. And nobody seems to notice me here."

"Oh", she smiled gently at him. "And you're appropriately dressed, even. Well, you might make some new friends here."

"I doubt it. I have all the friends I need." even if they were all currently very busy. "Uh, what is your mask, if I may ask?"

"Myrtha, from Giselle." she turned around to show her dress. "I took some liberties with it and made it black, but I think the essence of it is still there. It was my first major role when I started dancing."

"It suits you well", he nodded, smiling. "Mother of ghosts.1"

"And you, monsieur?" she chuckled.

"I am a paradox."

"How so?"

"I am a ghost, dressed as a man, dressed as a ghost." he smiled slightly, pleased with himself. He had prepared that answer, hoping someone would ask him. "I am the desire to be what you are, and not to be, at the same time."

"Well, it seems we are matching", she laughed. "Who'd have known?"

Erik chuckled, his eyes sparkling slightly. He almost couldn't believe he was having fun at this party.

"Now, I think that means we have to dance", Antoinette concluded. "Can you dance?"

"Afraid not."

"Liar."

"Alright, yes, I can. But do I have to?" he spread his arms. He did have some basic knowledge - he knew waltz, for example, and other things one could teach themselves when they were bored out of their mind five floors underground - but he wasn't going to go so far to show it.

"I have an idea", she said. "You don't have to dance a whole song with me, even. See that door over there?"

"The one leading to the broom closet?" he knew that door very well - there was another passage behind its wall that led to his home.

"That one. If you can dance with me from here across the ballroom to the closet, and open the door discreetly, we can simply vanish through it and nobody would notice where we've gone. Quite a mystery, don't you think? It would suit the theme of this ball."

He thought about it. "And then?"

"Well, that depends", she teased. "Are you willing to entertain your poor mother for the rest of this evening, little ghost? I hear there's a strange house down by the underground lake. Sometimes you can hear violin music from there, and I do like the sound of violins."

He grinned widely at her. "Oh. Well, you asked for it." He opened the balcony door, took her hands, and, as quickly as one possibly could waltz, swirled through the room through to the small door, where he opened it in one swift movement and gently pushed her inside.

"Impressive. I've never seen someone dance so quickly."

"Merci, Maman."

ooo

May 1880, Zagreb

(Half a lifetime ago)

Mr. Boričević led his twelve-year-old daughter furiously by her arm into the pretty interior of their considerably-sized house and slammed the door behind them. Alina's clothes and hands were dirty, her frizzy hair sticking out of her braid, her eyes glistening with tears, and what looked to be very intense fear and fury.

Mr. Boričević wondered if this kind of behavior was normal for a girl. None of his friends who had daughters ever mentioned having problems like these.

"You have some explaining to do!" he yelled at her. "What on earth were you thinking?"

"That slimy arse messed with Amelija! I saw him hitting her! She's only nine years old, she can't defend herself!" Alina was tall for her age but still almost half of her father's size; still, the hatred with which she screamed at him drove him to the edge every time.

"And the proper way to deal with that was to fight him in his backyard? What happened to calling us? Or his parents?"

"You weren't there!" Alina yelled, with bitterness in her voice that betrayed they quite often weren't there. "I had to do something, and I decided to teach him a lesson he won't forget!"

"I'll teach you a lesson you won't forget! You're embarrassing us all with this stupid behavior! You're a reckless, aggressive idiot, and you'll never amount to anything if you don't learn to control yourself!"

"That's not fair!" she stomped her foot. "He can bully Amelija, and he can hit me, but I can't hit him?" Even you can hit me, and I can't hit back, she

almost said. Why is this fine? Why is Amelija not protesting with me?

"I don't care what's fair at all!" he thundered. "This is not how a young lady solves her problems!"

"That's bullshit!" Alina screamed back at him. She barely had time to finish the sentence when she felt her father's large hand slap her across the face.

"Don't you dare talk to me like that!" he said, pointing a strict finger at her. "Maybe that will teach you that beatings hurt! You're grounded!" he turned around and stormed towards the door.

"How long?" Alina yelled after him, holding her still-hot cheek.

"Until you've impressed me with your good behavior! Now keep silent and stop making a fuss, your mother is sick!" he turned around again and slammed the door behind him.

Alina crumpled into one of the armchairs, crying inconsolably. If beatings could teach her that beatings hurt, she would surely have learned that already. She realized on some level that no matter what she took out of this, her father would still be able to claim he was right - no, hitting Alina was never particularly effective; while it did drive the point home that getting hit hurts, it didn't make her want to listen to her father's reasoning or obey him any more. If anything, it made her hate him every time it happened. So, yes, his point was true. It was a paradox Alina's young mind was unable to wrap itself around as she cried in the middle of her living room.

Alina didn't enjoy getting in fights it hurt her to do it; it was simply something boys around her did and for some reason, she often found herself playing with boys - as they liked playing outside and exploring forbidden places, and her parents' friends mostly had sons - so she sometimes found herself throwing a few punches as well. It was normally not a problem; neither of them would ever snitch and by the next day they'd be friends again. Alina felt bitter regret after every punch she threw, and rarely actually got angry enough to hurt someone. But Ranko, this slimy little arse played a different kind of game, one Alina didn't know yet, and staring into

their parent's beautiful gold-embroidered curtains she decided for the first time in her life she'd learn that game.

She'd find a different way to solve her problems, she swore to herself, and would never hit another person again. It wasn't because of the pain, particularly, that still seared through her cheek – it was not nearly the first time this happened as an aftermath of her arguments with her father. It was because of the hatred and fury she felt for her father that she decided she never wanted that kind of hatred to be directed at her. She would one day, in one way or another, win against all these treacherous, hypocritical assholes.

Once she calmed down, she took out a piece of paper as she often did when she was upset, and sat down with a pencil. She would behave, alright. She wrote down "Dear teta Giry" with her still shaky hand and started writing. She was curious about auntie's opinion on all this and could use some reasonable advice.

Only a hundred meters away, Amelija knocked on the Novak family door, her pretty little cheeks stained as she cried loudly. Mrs. Novak opened and saw a pretty little girl with honey-colored locks bawling her eyes out, and immediately softening.

"What is wrong, honey?"

"R-R-Ranko hit my sister", she sobbed. "He hit her, and now she's crying, and I don't know what to do, and -"

"Shush, dear, come in. Don't cry", Mrs. Novak led her into their kitchen and sat her at the table, cutting up some melon and placing it on the table in front of her. Amelija loved melon but decided to wait for now.

"What happened, dear? You can tell me." Ranko's younger brother, Stjepan, came into the room when he heard melon being sliced, but stopped silently when he saw what was unfolding.

"My-me and my sister were playing, and- and Ranko started to argue with her because she told him not to push me and then they started fighting", she started crying again. "She's a girl and you can't hit girls and she's so sad

these days because our mother is sick and now Alina is hurt too and I don't know what to do - " she finished, crying into her hands.

This was half-true; their mother was sick, but she only had a nasty cold which Amelija knew very well. She felt like it wouldn't hurt to mention it nevertheless.

Mrs. Novak's face hardened into stone. "Oh, that little… he'll hear from me, alright. Ranko!" she called as she went out of the room furiously.

Once Mrs. Novak was out of the room, Amelija nonchalantly wiped the tears from her cheeks and dove into the melon as the boy sitting across the table stared at her half-hateful and half-impressed. He would have normally chimed in, but Amelija was so convincing and their mother so angry that he could only have gotten in trouble as well.

"You know that's not fair, right?" Stjepan asked her with disgust. "She beat him a lot worse than he beat her."

"Mmmh. I don't care what's fair at all", Amelija remarked, looking at the delicious piece of melon on her fork. "If Ranko touches Alina again, I'll kill him." She quickly put the piece of fruit in her mouth, chewing with a very self-satisfied look on her face.

It was the sweetest melon Amelija had ever tasted.

Chapter18:The Heart Of The Maze

Spring 1895; Coney Island

Present day

The bitter cold of winter that held its ground for too long stepped aside to make room for sunny Spring. Days grew longer; a young, mellow sun shone shyly in the sky, warming Alina's face as she came home from work every day. Birds chirped in the trees, rustling and shaking down white and pink petals as they flapped their wings. Veles had accepted Yana's offerings of crumbs because it was clear that Spring would be neither silent nor barren. She explained to Erik one day as he came to visit her and take a walk with her and Piotr that the concept of jealous deities was relatively new where she came from; Christ could be in charge of human souls and Veles reign over nature, animals, magic, and music? Why this was such a hard concept to some people, she didn't know.

„People in my church were very angry when I said it", she said a bit sadly. Not that it had necessarily made her think her beliefs were wrong – but she still felt a bit bad about making them angry. Yana had always taken it to heart when the people around her were displeased with her or thought her strange; she hadn't changed that much in the past few years, despite gaining some courage. She missed her old village. At least they understood.

„I never really thought about it", Erik admitted.

Yana shrugged. „You would like Veles maybe. He likes pranks, like you."

„Alright, I'm interested. You had me at magic and music. Tell me."

„Well, he brings chaos. He comes from underground in the sky, and makes angry Perun, god of thunder." Piotr listened carefully as she talked – he

knew these stories already but liked hearing them time after time.

„I like him already", Erik smiled. „So, the old battle of good and evil?"

„No", Piotr chimed in, frowning and appalled at Erik's ignorance. „You don't understand."

„I'm sorry, little man", Erik apologized with barely a hint of amusement in his voice. „I won't interrupt the story. Please continue."

„Well, he steals Perun's wife and brings her underground with him. Perun comes to get her back. Then Perun is underground, and Veles is up. Or so he thinks", Piotr interrupted, explaining solemnly.

„Really?" this was hitting a little too close to home for Erik. He would have to tell her to see how the story would unfold, but he felt he knew already.

„Well, really no. Mokosh is Perun's wife, but not really. She has her way." Yana smiled, taking over. „It's not even about whose wife it is. Perun and Veles fight, because they don't understand each other. Perun is thunder and air, and Veles is ground and water. Perun is sharp, and Veles is soft. You need both, or the world dies", she concluded authoritatively. „Perun doesn't know this, because he is proud and stubborn. But Veles is many things and many shapes, and he knows that all things and all shapes are important. Perun gives you life, but Veles understands the dead. He knows he has to lose after he wins. Souls in the forest miss him." She drew a circle in the air in front of her with her finger as she spoke.

„And what happens to Mo- uh, the wife?"

„Oh, that. She returns."

„To whom?"

„To both. One then the other. Some of Veles love Mokosh, but not all. Some of Mokosh loves Veles, but other loves Perun. Then the year ends and begins again. I tell you, she has her way."

„Hmm." He smiled. „You're right. He doesn't sound like a jealous god. I think you're fine."

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On the first day of Spring, Erik brought home a large handful of field flowers and, holding his hands high and opening them, gently let them fall on the table in front of Alina. The colorful arrangement of daisies, dandelions, poppies, and violets swirled around her for a moment before spreading all over her papers and filling her head with a sweet, fresh scent.

"I thought I'd make the message clearer this time", he said as he lowered his hands. The colorful flowers reflected in her glistening dark eyes as she looked at them in silent wonder.

"Did you pick them yourself? Where did you find them?" she looked at him.

"I'm not going to tell you that", he smiled. "But you can braid them in your hair if you'd like. I can't promise I won't comment on it, though."

"I just might do that", she looked at them in thought, "but I have another idea." She picked the violets out of the heap leaving the rest, took a large glass bowl, then filled it with water and threw them inside. Erik watched her in confusion as she rolled up her sleeves and washed her face in them while the flowers swirled around the bowl.

"It's an old custom", she clarified, patting her face with a towel. "If you wash your face in violets on the first day of Spring, fairies will bless you1*."

"I've never heard of that."

"I think it might be a specifically Slavic tradition."

"What will the fairies bless you with?" he asked in amusement. Her face had a lovely blush on it from being washed in cold water.

"I don't know. Fairies are often tricky. They give you what you want and let you deal with the consequences", she joked. She poured the water out through the window, returning the sacrifice.

"Ah", he managed. The universe was hell-bent on mocking him again, it seemed. Alina seemed oblivious to how ominous that sounded, braiding the rest of the flowers in her hair and singing softly to herself. As much as she loved fairy stories, she wasn't concerned with superstitions. Erik shook his head; he needed to tell her, he needed to focus on his work, so he sat down and took out his papers. He had some composing he wanted to do today, seeing as the construction was nearing its end and he wasn't busy checking every detail of his blueprints anymore.

„Well", she clapped her hands as she finished, „how does it look?"

He smiled for a moment before replying. „If I didn't know you better, I'd mistake you for one of the fairies."

As Alina sat back down to grade homework, Erik lulled himself in his comfortable thoughts. He scribbled down the notes, forgetting about the outside world and temporarily free of his worries, tapping a rhythm with his free hand. Tap-tap-tap, then a pause, he waved his index finger around imagining how he would signal the flute to start while mellowing down the strings. Just one clear and soft sound against a wall of mulled cello harmonies playing a slightly ominous theme. The majority of the composition was written for a lead violin, but this one part was soft – too soft for the sharp sound of strings; it was made to resemble a soft, warm, cotton fog, being surrounded by something at the same time obscuring, obstructing and warmly encapsulating.

Over time, he started whistling the main theme of the section he was writing, then the cello parts, the harmonies, and tapping all along while he worked. The whistling turned into singing under his breath, then actual singing; he finished putting the last note and the last bar in the section with a song on his lips and a wide, shining smile spread across his face.

He looked up to see Alina staring at him, awestruck with the pencil in her hand stuck in mid-air.

„I did not expect your voice to sound like that", she whispered.

„Pardon me?" he leaned back, arms crossed and a smile fading from his face. He would give her a second more before he pointed out she was staring at him.

She shook her head, seemingly waking from a trance. „Your speaking voice is much deeper."

„So I've been told. But I'm a tenor." He shrugged. „It comes more naturally."

„To put it mildly", she looked back at him, finally putting down her pencil. „I don't think I've heard you sing before. Has anyone ever told you that you have the gentlest, purest, most innocent singing voice I have ever heard come from a man? I have never in my life heard a masculine voice sing so clearly and beautifully. It's almost ethereal."

„Stop it", he ran his fingers through his hair, feeling his cheeks getting hot. „You're making it sound like I'm some teenage boy."

„That is not what I meant at all", she said. „It's not juvenile. It's just... pure, I suppose. Can you sing some more?" she smiled, resting her chin on her hand. „I could listen to it all day."

„Maybe later", he mumbled, collecting his papers. He picked up the bundle, put it away in the drawer where he kept all of his most important projects, and closed it a little more loudly than he expected. "I have to go talk to Jack now." That was a lie. He had to tell her – he had to take a walk to think about some things. A new idea formed in the back of his head.

The sun was not so harsh yet these days, so Erik could walk in peace still bundled up in a scarf and hat. The scarf hid the edges of his mask and the hat cast a shadow over the upper part of his face – people could still probably see it if they took a good look, but Erik made it a point to walk quickly and rarely pass through crowded streets. If he wasn't so occupied, he might have noticed that the act of going outside during the daytime was no longer something that required him an hour to prepare for like it did this

time last year. He might have even noticed that a few of the people who lived close to him and got used to seeing him now nodded at him as they passed him by.

As he walked around lost in his thoughts, he did notice Walter sitting on the sidewalk across the street, talking cheerfully to another boy that looked to be about sixteen years old. The boy was short and very skinny, his eyes the same clear blue color as Walter's, but with an amicable, forgiving softness to them instead of Walt's piercing intensity. Mousy brown hair poked out of his newsboy-style cap, and the coat he wore was still too big for his narrow shoulders. The likeness was so remarkable that if Erik had to guess what Walt's brother would look like, he would have described exactly that boy. He passed by hoping to remain unnoticed; to his dismay, Walter still saw him and waved at him happily, running over to greet him with the teen boy following behind him.

„Hey, mister Demon", Walter called after him.

„Walt, goddamnit", the teenage boy next to him cursed. „Didn't we just talk about elders and attitude?"

Having been cleverly cornered between staying to talk to them and walking back home with this brat shouting "hey mister Demon" behind him all the way, he decided to go for the less noisy option. He stopped and turned around, waiting for them to catch up. „It's alright", Erik replied with amusement. „It's more of an inside joke by now. What do you want, Walter?"

„I heard your park is opening", Walter grinned. „Are you coming?"

„No." If he had to choose between coming to the opening to stand among a giant crowd of people or biting his legs off so that nobody could force him to go, Erik was quite sure which one he would prefer.

„Oh." Walter looked down, visibly disappointed.

„I've got other work", Erik said. „And you?"

„No, I can't go", Walter scoffed. „You still need tickets for amusement parks, remember?"

„Have you forgotten what I said already? I hope you don't forget your promises as often", Erik smiled. „You don't need a ticket. Look for Jack on an opening day, and he'll take you in."

Walter gaped back at him. „You're kidding!"

„The word is thank you, Walt", the teen boy glanced at him with annoyance. „Thank you, sir, for taking care of my rude little brat brother." The boy took off his hat politely and extended one skinny, worn-down hand to Erik. „My name is Samuel Preston, nice to meet you."

Erik hesitated for a moment, then offered his hand. „Hello."

„Walt told me about you, sir", Sam continued. „Thanks for taking care of him that night."

„It's alright", Erik replied, hoping the boy would stop thanking him so politely; it was starting to make him uncomfortable. Walt's sassy rudeness was much easier to deal with, honestly. „Walter helped us during construction. He can visit the park anytime he wants."

„Is it true, Walt?" Sam pushed him, laughing. „You were useful? Or did you just wreak havoc while nobody was looking?"

„Just a little bit...", Walt pushed him back, laughing as well. „...of both."

„A menace, this one", Sam turned to Erik just as he was hoping to say goodbye and vanish. „Of all his teachers, there's exactly one that can stand him. I don't know what you did to make him listen to you, but there has to be some black magic involved."

„I wish", Erik looked at Walt. „I think he only listens to me because of Alina, and you need to ask her how she does it. I can't guarantee her methods aren't witchcraft, honestly."

„Alina?" Sam looked at Walter wide-eyed. „Wait, I just realized. I feel stupid now. Miss Alina is your nice teacher Boricevic?"

„Uh-huh", Walter frowned. „What of it?"

„The same Alina from the Russian refugee village?"

„Yeah. That's where I was that night."

„I didn't know", Sam shook his head. „I didn't know it was the same person. I haven't been to the Russian village much, but I've heard of her. There are a lot of Russian boys on the construction site where I work. They say she's great; she taught them a little English."

„That's her", Erik nodded.

„Then, if you know her, maybe you can solve a mystery for me", Sam smiled mischievously. „My friend Yuri said you can hear strange music, violin music, coming from around Miss Alina's house at random times. He says it sounds heavenly; unlike anything, he ever heard before. Do you know who it is? The boys are obsessed; it can't be her because she's often not at home when they hear it. They wanna find that person and – I don't know what they'd do, but they're big fans", Sam laughed.

„I don't know", Erik said, adjusting the collar of his coat a bit higher around his face. „Maybe it's ghosts. I have to go now."

„Nice meeting you, sir", Sam shouted cheerfully behind him. „Thanks again!"

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The park was scheduled to open in late April and as much as
Erik begged them not to make a huge deal out of it, they all still made a huge deal out of it. Alina, Yana, Jack, and seemingly everyone on the entire goddamn island was excited to see it, and Erik would have been excited as well in some other universe, probably. Truth be told, the whole process of making the damn thing was so exhausting he just wanted it to be over so

that he would no longer have to anticipate all the disasters he would have to prevent.

It was still nice to see how excited Alina was about something he had designed; he was still shamelessly eager to show her all the things he could do and see her face light up every time. Would he ever get tired of it? Probably not, he concluded, it was like an opiate that numbed his other thoughts and left him addicted for more. He thought often about how he would have to tell her to find some sort of way to go with her through the park when nobody was around.

It could be arranged, and if anyone, he could arrange it.

He planned it well in advance, but hesitated to ask her – why would she want to go in the middle of the night when the buildings are eerie, dark, and desolate if she could just go during the day as it was supposed to be experienced?

Except Alina liked all the strange places he had led her so far, and Erik saw no reason why she would lie to him about it one woman could like both frolickings around meadows with dozens of children and making little paper stars, as well as sneaking through dusty dark corridors and climbing through the cliffs of misty deserted beaches. Is that the result of growing up with those strange Slavic legends? he wondered with amusement. Do other mothers aside from Yana feed their children complex morals about the duality of a man much too early for them to understand? In any case, the obvious conclusion would be that she would enjoy seeing the park both ways; and he would make sure he made it happen so that both occasions would spark her interest.

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„I still think you'll be sorry for not coming", Alina remarked with a pin in her mouth as she pulled her hair up. She was getting ready for the opening, aware that a lot of Jack's – and by proxy, their – business associates would be present, and she was determined to present her best self to the world. „It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see something so giant be born of your work."

„You'll have Walter to keep you company", Erik replied. „I've arranged to have him come for free."

„Really? That's so kind of you." Alina smiled, checking her hair in the window.

„Yes. I forgot to mention, that I met him and his older brother a week ago. Did you know the Russian boys spread legends about the mysterious violinist stalking around your house?"

„Yes, of course, I knew. Everybody knows." Alina laughed. „I think they're quite sure it's you, but they've seen you outside so rarely and never seen you play, it's bogging their minds. It's quite funny. The whole village is in on it, and they keep pestering Yana to tell them all about it."

Erik looked silently out the window, smiling to himself.

„You enjoy infamy, don't you?"

„Maybe a little bit."

„Which brother?" Alina asked.

„Huh? Oh, he said his name was... Samuel?" Erik frowned. „I think."

„Oh, Sam", Alina smiled. „Sam's a sweetheart. Hank is tougher; he's the oldest so he's had it the worst. He's very withdrawn, mostly works, and tries to control his dad when he can. But Sam is different. He can't stand up to people, but he's taken it as his job to help their mom raise the young ones. He often comes to pick Walt up when he's in trouble."

„So I've gathered."

„If you meet him again, maybe you could invite him to the park as well", Alina said. „I think Sam forgot how to be a child long ago. He deserves to be reminded."

„Can you do it for me?" Please?

„I could, but Sam is very sweet. He'll love you for it, and he'll be very thankful."

„That's exactly why", Erik mumbled, feeling his cheeks get warmer under the mask. „Just... if you happen to see him again, tell him I said Walter's brothers can come as well. You can tell him... tell him he impressed me with his manners or something."

„He did, didn't he?" Alina smiled. „Sweet boy. Alright, I'm going. Are you sure you won't come along?"

„Yes. I'm sure Jack and Walter will keep you occupied", Erik remarked. „I'll see you later."

"Actually", she said, "They will, but I would love to see you, specifically. And I'd love to witness it when you see your creation come to life. Just something to consider." She kissed him lightly before walking out the door. Erik stood on the doorframe, watching her leave.

"Why?" he called after her.

"I just want to see you happy", she turned around and shouted back. "It's a rare and beautiful sight." She started running and hurried along the road until she caught up to two familiar blonde-haired figures in front of her.

„Yana!"

Yana turned, along with Piotr, and waited for her.

„Alina", she said. „You're late. I thought I understood wrong and had to wait at the entrance."

„No, no", she huffed. „I'm sorry! I wouldn't leave you alone like that!"

„It's fine", Yana smiled. „Are you excited?"

„Oh, I'm so excited! I've never been to a park this big before!" Alina looked at her with sparkling eyes. „And you?"

„No, where would I go?" Yana laughed. „And Piotr gets to see it too. He'll get spoiled from all the pretty things he's seeing, so young."

„I won't!" Piotr remarked, visibly offended.

„See?" Alina smiled at her. „He says he won't. That settles it."

The entrance to the park was packed – nearly everyone came to see it; even the people who couldn't afford it stood outside and looked curiously. George Tilyou gave a little speech – quite a funny one, Alina noticed; the rest of the speeches were quite boring but Tilyou seemed confident enough in his success that he spoke openly and joked until the audience practically ate from his hand. He was a charming, convincing businessman – Alina could understand how he was getting along so well with Jack.

Just as she thought that another familiar figure quietly appeared next to her, tipping his hat politely to reveal a mass of curly dark hair.

„Hey, Jack", Alina greeted him. „You've shaved your mustache!"

„Yeah. I think it makes me look more approachable", Jack scratched his chin, smiling. „Especially to children."

„You don't work with children", Alina remarked.

„No, I work with you and your brave knight", Jack winked. „In any case, I just dropped by to say hello. I'm glad to see you – but now I have to go chat with an awful lot of really bigheaded people who came to the opening to be seen since your darling is adamant not to take over any of that part of the job. I'm sure it would be boring to you, so go ahead and have fun."

„Oh, alright", Alina said. „I'm sorry you have to work even today."

„It's fine. I do like mingling. If I get George alone, I might be able to talk him into having a few drinks later", he said. „Funnily enough, we were closer friends before we worked together on this."

„Oh, alright. Fingers crossed you get him out", Alina laughed. „Say hi to Mr. Tilyou from me as well. And Erik."

„Certainly, my fair lady", Jack tipped his hat as he went on his way.

Alina strolled through the park in amazement – even though the whole area was packed with people, she still could find her way around and with a little patience she got them into some of the rides – the workers did remember her talking to Jack and were willing to do some little favors and get them some extra seats. Yana led Piotr everywhere he wanted; he barely registered her and she had to constantly check on him so he wouldn't get lost in the sea of people. Alina noticed it stressing her out; she was just wondering what she might do about it when she saw two other familiar figures standing not far from them.

„Sam!" she yelled after them. „Walter!"

The boys turned around and hurried to her. Jack must have correctly guessed Erik's wishes - either that, or he invited Sam on his own accord, seeing as he did have a soft spot for the less fortunate kids.

„Listen, boys, I have a proposition", she looked at Sam, then gestured to Yana and Piotr to come as well. „Sam, you're a responsible young man, aren't you?"

Sam shrugged, not too eager to be burdened with responsibilities on this blessed day of his life.

„Listen, I have so many of these tokens for various attractions and rides", she took them out of her bag. „I'm willing to give them all to you, under one condition", she waved them in front of the boys. Their eyes went wide with something very close to actual hunger.

„Yes?" Sam asked carefully.

„I want you to take care of this little man", she gestured at Piotr, „so that his mom gets some rest. If that's alright with you, Yana, of course. Piotr already knows Walt, don't you?"

„Heeey!" Piotr greeted Walt cheerfully. Walt waved back at him, somewhat hesitant.

„In any case, he's great and won't bother you at all, but I want you to keep a close watch on him so he doesn't get lost among all these people. At the end of the day, find us here and we'll all get hot dogs. My treat", she announced. „Is everyone alright with that?"

„Is your nose better?" Piotr interrupted, looking at Walt seriously.

„Huh? Yeah, it's no big deal. It healed." Walter replied somewhat confused.

„It's the muffins", Piotr nodded solemnly. „Muffins healed you."

„Ha!" Walter laughed. „If I ate enough, would they also fix my grades?"

„Maybe", Piotr shrugged. „I dunno. You should try."

„Alright, fine", Sam ran his hand across his face, listening to that exchange of nonsense. „We'll take him. He's great. I believe you."

Yana pointed a strict finger at him. „He's gentle. If you make him cry, I murder you."

„I wouldn't dare, ma'am."

„Good", she smiled. „Have fun."

Alina watched from a distance, smiling to herself as Yana ran after them at least three times to tell Sam another important thing to watch for when dealing with Piotr; Sam had finally lost his patience and told her he could goddamn handle it, I have three younger siblings please leave us alone – and as Yana finally started to admit defeat and turned to come back to Alina, she heard something she didn't expect to.

"Hello", a quiet voice whispered right next to Alina. She nearly jumped in surprise and turned around quickly to see a shape in the shadows she hadn't noticed before.

"You're here!"

"Quieter", he said.

"Sorry", Alina lowered her voice, smiling. "I'm really glad you came."

"Somebody told me I'd regret it if I wasn't present for the opening. Something-something-once-in-a-lifetime", Erik smiled.

"I thought you'd hate it here, with all the people", she remarked.

"I do. Luckily, I built this park, so I know where to hide", he replied, walking slowly out of the shadow. He was dressed a little too warm for Spring - scarf, and hat still on his head, wrapped carefully to hide the edges of the mask and cast a shadow over the rest of his face. "I won't stay long", he said. "But, I've considered what you said. And I wanted to ask you, are you busy this evening?"

"Not at all", she smiled.

"In that case, I'd like to continue our breaking-and-entering tradition. Would you like to come here with me, after dark? It will be locked, nobody should be here. I can show you some things around here. Things most people won't get to see, or think to look for."

"Oh, incredible", Alina's lips spread into a mischievous grin he was starting to see on her quite often. "I can't wait. When and where?"

"Just meet me here around ten", he nodded and turned around.

"That's quite late", she called after him. "I'll have you know I'm not that kind of lady, mister!"

"Or any other kind, really", she heard a chuckle as he disappeared again.

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Alina wandered through the park with Yana until well after sundown – Piotr stayed up well past his bedtime, excited to be playing with two older boys; and it took Alina having to take Sam aside and explain that the park would still be here tomorrow, and they can go again but right now they all need to get going before it closes or the child collapses – for them to finally leave. Alina went back to her house but only had time to freshen up and put

on another warmer layer before she went back outside and towards the park entrance again. The sun had set while she was inside, and the night was promising to be clear and well-lit by the moon. She reached the entrance and waited patiently until she heard him behind her again.

„Hello", Erik said, his smile looking slightly more shy than usual in the pale moonlight. „Are you ready? Or have you had enough for today?"

„I have no doubt this will be an entirely new experience now that you're here", she remarked happily, wrapping her arm around his. He smiled slightly wider as he kissed her lightly and led her inside.

He led her to one of the larger buildings – the one with the maze, Alina remembered and stopped in front of the door to take out his keys.

„You have your keys to the park?" Alina asked in amusement. „Did you make them yourself?"

„Yes. I think I deserve them", he smiled as he opened the door and politely let her into the building. Once inside, he turned on the lights – the building, unlike the others, actually had electricity as it was completely closed without any windows. Alina followed as they crossed the entrance hall and stopped at the beginning of the maze – it was quite big, that much she remembered from the blueprints, but she couldn't guess its size – all the walls were entirely made of numerous mirrors, as well as the ceiling, with only the floor made of some normal, non-reflecting material. Erik stopped and looked at her slightly awkwardly as she blinked at the swirling illusions.

"So, this is it", he said.

"The mirror maze?" Alina turned around. It looked incredibly confusing to her; dozens of her reflections swirling around in all angles, seemingly going into infinity. She had a strange thought that if she stayed too long in here, she might forget if she, herself, was real or just one of the reflections. Also, I did not realize before how frizzy my hair is in the back. God damn it. Ignorance was bliss.

"Yes. I noticed you liked it when I showed you the blueprints, so I thought I'd take you here. I mean, you can go anytime you want, but I thought you'd like… I have something more challenging for you", he rambled. "If you're interested, that is."

"I'm interested", she smiled, turning to him.

"In that case, you have to solve this maze", he waved his hand around him. "There is a way to solve it - more than one way, it's up to you how you play it. But I won't be helping you. However, I'll give you one hint: don't trust the mirrors. Don't trust anything you see."

"How will I know I've solved it?" she chuckled.

"Easily. All you have to do is find me at the end of it", he said quietly.

"Oh, so there's a prize at the end, too! That's motivating", Alina grinned. "Alright, I accept the challenge."

"Good luck", he said, and as he did the mirrors started to rotate and the reflections shifted; she never noticed him moving, but as soon as she looked away, he was gone.

Suddenly, as Alina was left alone in the room entirely covered with mirrors she understood what he meant by don't trust anything you see - she couldn't even tell where the room ended or what shape it was. Well, if it's a maze, then I suppose it's full of passages and hallways and not rectangular spaces - which means I just have to find the exit that leads to a hallway, for a start. She looked around again. That would be the one where my reflection is smaller because the mirror facing me is further away. She noticed one such place and walked towards it confidently before bumping into a wall. She shook her head and let out a curse.

"I like your reasoning", Erik's voice said from somewhere around her. "It would have worked if there were fewer mirrors. It's harder to predict how they reflect when there are this many."

"Are you going to judge my mistakes the entire time?" she said, rubbing her shoulder in annoyance.

"Well, I can shut up, if you want me to. But since you can't trust your eyes, it might be useful to hold onto any input you can get", the voice replied. "I'd consider it if I were you. Nobody else gets hints in here."

"Hmm", she frowned. "Hints come in the same package with sass?"

"Yes", the voice replied with amusement.

"Fine, fine, I'll take it." she tried again. Feeling around with her hands, she went around the room once, noting the tiny seams between the mirrors. She had something of a feeling for the size of the room now - it was roughly three meters by three meters, and it seemingly had no openings.

"This is a sealed room", she said. "I could swear it was open when we came in."

The voice kept silent.

"The mirrors shift, that much I know", she continued. "they don't make much of a sound, so I can presume you're shifting them without me noticing as well, right?" She thought about it for a moment. "Unless they shift on their own accord? Walter said you had a lot of clock-like mechanisms involved. Are they set to shift at certain times?"

The voice kept silent.

"I'm getting close to it, aren't I?" she smiled. "In that case, let's see… I'll just wait until they shift again." She positioned herself in the corner of the room with her back against the wall so she would have a clear view of the entire room and waited. Sure enough, a few minutes later the mirrors shifted and her reflections danced across the room once again. Alina, wary of her previous experience, didn't go straight to the source of shifting but instead felt along the walls with her fingers again until she reached an opening. She stepped into the corridor as the mirrors shifted behind her again, sealing her away from the starting room.

"Very good", the voice said.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you? Watching me struggle from a distance and commenting on it?"

"Oh, immensely."

"I'll get back at you for this someday."

"I'm counting on it."

Alina moved slowly along the halls of the maze, trying to orient herself according to the layout of the building. The mirrors shifted every five or ten minutes, and she had limited time to explore before the reflections would start swirling again and she'd be back at square one, lost and confused. She tried for a while before giving up and leaning on one of the walls, growing slightly frustrated.

"For this to work, this entire building would have to be so small I can cross it in five to ten minutes, and then I'd have to memorize one of the paths in its entirety and wait for the right combination of mirrors to open so I'd be able to cross it. And I don't even know where I am, to be honest." she puffed. "It's not hard to solve in theory, but are you such an arse to make me do all of that?"

"I am if that's how you choose to solve the maze."

"Ah, so there's a better way to do it", she smiled. "I was hoping for that."

The voice kept silent.

"Did you say the solution was to find you at the end of the maze?"

"I did."

"So, wherever I happen to find you, that's the end?"

After a short pause, the voice replied quietly, "Yes."

"Oh, that's a whole new approach to it", Alina suddenly straightened up, grinning. "Why didn't you just say so? It's a much more entertaining game this way."

"I didn't want to make it too easy for you", the voice said with a definite hint of amusement. "There are multiple ways to solve it, and you just went from the most boring one to the one I honestly didn't expect yet. But, certainly, we can play that way."

"People are easier to move and much more fun to play with than mirrors", Alina remarked.

"Really? I'll make it so, then. Instead of playing against the maze, you're now playing against me." As the voice said that, Alina saw a little glimpse of a black coat in one of the mirrors from the very corner of her eye. She almost hurried towards it, when she remembered to put up her hands just in time to prevent another collision.

"So the mirrors move in two ways now, I presume? When they're supposed to, and whenever you make them move?"

"Do you think so?"

"Yes. Can you affect when they're supposed to move as well?"

"Can I?"

Alina laughed out loud in the middle of the room, enjoying the new turn of events. Certainly, Erik wasn't going to make this easy, but he wouldn't make it too hard either - what would be the fun in that? She could bet he would keep close at most times, barely within reach, just to taunt her. She began making her way through the maze again, following the swirling corner of his black coat - except whenever she thought she'd caught the real image, it would turn out to be another reflection; as soon as she thought she'd figured it all out and started trusting her eyes everything would change and confuse her once more. She suddenly had another idea.

"Hah! You got me", she said sweetly after another mirage disappeared.

"I told you not to trust anything you see." she saw the glimpse of black once more, but the voice made the mistake of speaking at the same time - and she could tell it came from the other end of the corridor.

"I see. And can I trust what I hear?" she said, running towards the other end. She almost reached the end of the corridor and saw another, definitely real, glimpse of black when the mirror moved right in front of her and stopped her right in her tracks.

"Clever trick, darling." she heard, this time from some direction she couldn't pinpoint at all.

"Thank you", she grinned. The mirrors rotated again, blurring her vision, and as she stepped back to look at them she somehow lost her balance and nearly fell.

"What?" she managed. She looked down to see what had tripped her. There seemed to be nothing there, aside from the small semicircles forming around each mirror - upon further inspection, she saw that they were small cracks cut out in the floor.

"Oh, I'm so stupid" she laughed. "I never noticed that before - the floor underneath the mirrors can also move! These are rotating discs!"

"Yes", the voice replied. "Good observation."

"It's not just the room shifting, it's me as well! If I stand on the disc, it can move me around - everything is covered in mirrors so can't tell if I'm the one moving or the walls."

"Indeed."

"That's unfair", she laughed. "the more things I figure out, the more you change the game. You can keep making it harder, but what's the point of that?"

"The point is, you can't control the maze. You have to solve the puzzle."

"Ah", she said. She scratched her chin, thinking for a moment. "That's a hint, isn't it? I can't control the maze?"

The voice kept silent again.

"The trick is to make you move it in such a way for me to reach you, isn't it?"

"If you choose to play that way, yes."

"Hah!" she grinned. "So I'm not playing against you at all - I'm playing with you!"

"I suppose that's a valid way of looking at it."

"Alright, then", she said. "Since I assume you can see me this whole time, I'll just stand on one of these discs and let it take me where it will." she positioned herself on the disc and stood still, smiling to herself, but nothing happened.

"If you want to move the disc, I can do that. But you have to answer a question", the voice said. "If you answer a riddle convincingly, the path will take you closer to me. If not, you might get lost again."

"That sounds fair."

"Alright. The first riddle." he paused, thinking about it some more. "What makes a man, and not a beast?"

"Hmmm. And there is one correct answer to this?"

"Not necessarily. You just have to convince me."

She thought about it. "I suppose that depends on who you're asking?"

"I'm asking you."

"That's fair", she trailed off, lost in thought. "I don't know", she admitted. "My first answer would have been - the ability to think, but some animals

can think and solve puzzles as well, I've seen it. And some men who can think, on the other hand, are quite monstrous to me. I'd say music and art, but birds can sing as well - whereas some of the most humane people I know cannot. Then, I wanted to say the ability to love and care for others - but the same problem applies. Some animals can love, and some men cannot, and yet they still have the right to call themselves men. So, I don't know."

The mirrors remained unmoving. She could see at the corner of her eye dozens of her reflections with their brow furrowed in thought.

"Maybe the difference is whether others are willing to vouch for your personhood?" the voice suggested after some hesitation.

"I wouldn't say so. People are easily persuaded one way or the other."

"What is your answer, then?"

"I don't know", she admitted. "My answer is, I suppose, that I don't know. I'd say that anyone with the ability to claim personhood would have to have the right to it - and yet some people who don't have that ability should have that right all the same. In the end, maybe it doesn't matter."

The mirrors shifted and she found herself in a different corridor. "Was that the correct answer?"

"I don't know either. But it was convincing."

Alina stepped along the hallway and reached the end, stopping right before she stepped on another circular disc.

"I have a puzzle as well", she announced.

"That's not how the game works."

"The game has changed at least three times already, and if you're the only one who can do that, that's cheating", she raised an eyebrow.

"Alright, if you want to be difficult. Ask."

"What made you build this?" Alina gestured around her. "I have never seen you look into a mirror willingly, and you hate them, yet this is so beautifully constructed and it's the first place you decided to show me. Why?"

The voice kept silent for the longest time yet. Alina was starting to think she'd offended him when he finally spoke.

"Because you can't trust your eyes in here. Everything that looks real, could be an illusion. You have to let things other than your senses guide you."

"Convincing", Alina stepped on the rotating disc.

"My turn", Erik said. "Why is the woman who likes to have everything under control alright with being guided blindly through a maze of mirrors that move on their own?"

"The mirrors don't move on their own", Alina smiled. "They're being moved by a man."

"And you trust in your ability to control the man who controls the mirrors?"

"No, I trust the man himself. I trust you, obviously", she replied with more affection in her voice than he expected.

The disc moved silently and another corridor opened. Alina walked to the end and stopped just in front of another rotating disc.

"When was the first time you realized you liked me?" She asked with a very self-satisfied grin on her face.

"What? I'm not telling you that."

"Really? Don't you want to know my answer? I'll tell you, but only if you tell me yours."

The voice replied quietly, "I do."

Alina waited patiently, the same smug grin still on her face.

"The first time?" Erik's voice hesitated. "Alright. It was when we were sleeping in Yana's kitchen on our first night here. You said something you thought would offend me, and you got very flustered and started apologizing too much."

Alina blinked. "What?"

"You're cute when you blush."

She stepped on the disc, her brow furrowed with pretend annoyance as she tried to stop a smile from spreading across her face.

"And you?" Erik said, barely above a whisper.

"I realized I liked you first when we talked about books in that horrible ship cabin", she said cheerfully. "I realized I couldn't wait for you to finish each book, because you always had something interesting to say about them when I asked, and I wanted excuses to keep talking to you."

"Really? Back then?"

"Yes", she laughed, blushing slightly. "I realized I liked you, however, when Yana invited you to her Easter dinner without telling me. I got jealous."

Erik let out a single surprised laugh. "Alright. Unexpected, but convincing." The disc moved, and Alina walked further along the corridor. Erik looked down at her as he walked through the space between the maze and the actual ceiling, on the two-way mirror that covered the top of the maze, allowing him to see her but not her to see him. Alina was trailing cheerfully through the corridors, and Erik suddenly felt incredibly stupid and cowardly. This woman was walking confidently through the maze being led only by his voice, while he had to hide behind countless mirrors and a carefully planned game only to ask a few questions. While there were other things he wanted to tell her to tell ask her, he suddenly decided this was not the way to do it and quickly climbed down through a trapdoor from the mirrored ceiling and walked through the maze towards her.

"Next puzzle?" Alina asked, standing on a disc surprised by the sudden silence, when all the mirrors shifted in a dizzying whirlpool again to reveal Erik standing right in front of her, looking surprisingly shy with his hands clasped in front of him.

"No. You won", he said, stretching his arms out slightly. It was a gesture of mock defeat, but Alina seemed to take it differently as she threw herself right into his open arms.

"Ha!" She laughed victoriously. "I'm the smartest person on this goddamn island!"

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"Sam and Walter kept asking me all about you today", she said as she walked beside him out of the building, holding her hand tightly around his. "You're gathering quite a numerous following of naughty children, you know."

"They are your children, Alina, they just keep getting stuck to me when you're not around", he groaned. "Can't you recommend them some other adult as your substitute? Anyone else would be better."

"I could, but they seem to like you the best. I didn't tell them to do that." she winked. "Don't pretend you don't like it. Nobody ever asked you to talk to Walter, you did that yourself. Just admit you like kids and move on."

"I like Piotr."

"Alright. Fine. I'll just tell Walter you said you don't like him", she teased. Erik looked at her in shock and bewilderment for a second before looking away, composing himself with a loud cough.

"That's what I thought", Alina shrugged, stifling a laugh.

Erik led her to the bottom of the large Ferris wheel and stopped to look at her.

„I can't make the whole wheel move", he said. „It would attract attention."

„That's fine. We don't have to."

„However", he continued, „I have built a secret little room in the center of it. We can climb to the top from the inside, and then there's a little window we can open and look outside. It's a nice view. If you want to."

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"In all seriousness, I do understand you're feeling overwhelmed by all the people around", she said as they climbed the incredibly narrow staircase. "Sometimes I also wish everyone would just stop needing things from me and leave me alone."

"You've said that already. And yet, the first thing you did when we sailed was befriended a sailor boy." Erik walked in front of her, careful not to go too quickly as she was holding on to his sleeve in the darkness.

"Well… he was very funny."

"And then Yana. And an entire village, then Jack, and…" he waved his hand. "I don't think I need to go on."

"It kind of happened on its own, to be fair." She stopped as he unlocked and opened another door, leading her into a tiny room; he opened the window and moved aside so she could take a look.

„Oh, I can see the entire island", Alina leaned slightly. „And the sea in the distance. This is - very beautiful, especially in this moonlight."

„Mhm", Erik mumbled behind her as he looked. After some consideration, he gently wrapped his arm around her waist from behind, pulling her closer as he rested his chin on top of her head. Alina said nothing for a change; she merely sighed as she leaned back into him. He enjoyed the comfortable silence for a few minutes before he gathered the courage to ask his last question.

„You say you enjoy privacy and solitude, but you keep gathering people around you", he started. „Like moths to a flame. I never expected to be

surrounded by so many people in my life, just for the fact I happen to be close to you."

„Hm." She frowned. „I'm good at giving people what they need. Consolation, support, encouragement, an ear to listen, a shoulder to cry on. They get addicted to it, I think."

„Is any of it honest?" he fixed his gaze on the distant lights. „Or do you simply wish to be seen as a good person?"

„All of it is honest. I do care about people feeling good and living a good life", she said. „Even if it doesn't mean I necessarily want them in my life."

„What is the distinction, then?" he asked, focusing very hard on his voice so it wouldn't by any means tremble. He wasn't sure if he wanted to know. „Between those you want to help, and those you truly care about?"

Alina looked at him in surprise. „The ones I do want in my life are the ones who care about me as well, not what they can get from me."

„That's a fairly low standard."

„Do you think so? How many people have you met that truly cared for you and liked you as a person, as opposed to liking what you did to make them feel good?"

„Fair point", he shrugged. „It should be said, I always liked you better when you were yourself, even when it was less pleasant than... when you try to be pleasant", he added hurriedly. What poetic wording. I should write these things in advance; as soon as I have to improvise saying something sweet to her I sound like an illiterate child.

"Yes, I've noticed", she smiled into the starry sky. "It's so strange. I felt offended at first, even, that you didn't appreciate all this effort I was putting into saying the right things."

"I did appreciate it", he admitted. "I just didn't believe it. Hearing exactly what I needed to hear to keep me calm - seemed too good to be true, felt

like a trick. But that's not your fault."

"That makes sense. I just didn't think about it that way back then."

Comfortable silence spread around as they looked at the flickering stars - at least, one of them found it comfortable. Erik once again felt a sudden need to say something - it had started to creep up on him in happier, more intimate moments, the gnawing you need to tell her to need to tell her - the inner voice didn't even have the basic decency to specify what it was he needed to say; should he tell her what he's done to end up here, and what kind of person he is? Should he tell her how much he loves her and can't imagine living without her anymore, and how much it scares him? Should he tell her what a neurotic mess he is underneath all this self-control, and how taxing it is for him to constantly keep himself in check? Should he tell her about the symphony? Any of those will do. Anything that will make it all seem less unreal.

Is there such a thing I can say?

Maybe. Try them all and see what happens.

That doesn't sound like a good idea.

Then keep reaching out forever on the very edge of real closeness, too cowardly to jump -

"Is something wrong?", Alina asked.

"No. Why? Is it?"

"I just thought you seemed troubled."

"No, no - I was just thinking." he paused, trying to compose a sentence she deserved to hear, but as usual, he stopped halfway through and compromised. "I… enjoy these shenanigans we do."

"Me too", she smiled.

"And I'm glad we're doing them together", he continued. "I… there isn't anyone I'd rather be here with. Not even alone. I know that doesn't make sense, but I always preferred being alone, and now I prefer coming here with you."

"I understand. I feel the same." As she smiled, he noticed the same wrinkles around her eyes he saw for the first time in the cramped, dimly-lit ship cabin.

No, you don't understand. This is not even what I wanted to say.

Erik looked at her, realizing his mouth was still open as if he wanted to say something else. He quickly closed it, shaking his head and looking away. Maybe next time.

Chapter 19:Leaving

May 1895, Coney Island

After the park opened, it didn't take long for the guests to start pouring in. The attractions were a huge success, and even Erik with his relatively humble percentage of profits soon found that he had trouble spending all the money he was earning. Jack, on his part, had no trouble spending the money he was earning; he had some things planned for a long time and he happily threw himself into renovating his house, sending money to his less-fortunate relatives, and investing in some more good whiskey. Erik visited him several more times, always with some very good excuse for coming, and Jack happily invited him in every time as if it was his idea to talk him into staying. Jack himself kept the habit of coming to drink coffee with Erik and Alina in the mornings, often finding Yana there as well.

Erik, originally eager to move away from this damned island as soon as possible, found it suddenly hard to leave, which he admitted to Alina one evening as she snuggled up next to him in an armchair.

"Oh, I understand. I've moved before. It's a huge bother." Alina scoffed. "Do you know how many things I've managed to just simply lose between two houses? Incredibly many."

"That's not helping me, darling", he smiled at her. "How do you say "darling" in your language?"

"Depends on if you're speaking to a man or woman, and if you're trying to be more romantic or platonic, and more formal or informal, but…" she laughed. "if I was to call you darling in Croatian, I'd say drag. If you were to say it to me, you'd say draga."

"Draga", he repeated.

"You're good at this."

"I'm generally good at reproducing sounds correctly, yes", he chuckled. "Then, draga, it's not losing things that bother me. I don't have many belongings, to begin with", at least I haven't had the chance to collect many since they all burned down back in Paris, "I can carry all the important ones with me at once." he thought about it for a moment. "I think I just got used to living here. People don't pay much attention to me anymore, either."

"Our best friend also lives next door", Alina offered.

"That's nice as well. I've never expected to… have a place I wouldn't want to leave", he admitted. "Do you want to leave? I don't imagine you're used to living in an immigrant village. If you want to, we can move, of course", he added, somewhat worried. Or you could move by yourself. Please don't do that.

"I'm used to living all alone in a city that was much gloomier than this place, so this is a welcome change", she laughed. "I don't think I'd live here forever, but don't worry. I'm not in a hurry to move either."

"Hmm." Erik smiled slightly to himself, running his fingers through her hair.

"Where did you live before? Not with auntie, I suppose?"

"Uh...no, no. I lived alone", he said, contentment draining quickly out of him to be replaced with unease. He suddenly felt the strong need to tell her already tell her to get up and walk away, but he couldn't do it with Alina sitting on him; he forced himself to stay calm.

"You don't talk much about your life in Paris", she remarked.

"There isn't much to talk about", he said slowly. Coward. Alina looked at him for a moment with an expression he couldn't figure out - it was such a stupid, obvious lie she couldn't possibly have believed it; the very first thing

Antoinette told her about him was that he was running from the police - and he looked away, unable to stand her gaze.

"Alright. But you do know you could tell me anything if you wanted to?"

"Yes, yes," he said impatiently. It's not your listening skills I'm worried about. "Listen, I… I'll tell you. But not today."

"There is no rush", Alina replied lazily. She had something to say to him as well and was waiting for the right moment. She took his hand and put it back on her head. "You can keep playing with my hair now."

"Oh, I'm allowed to?" he teased.

"Yes, I'm granting you that honor. Drag."

Since it was decided they'd stay for a while longer, Erik took to adding some much-needed additions to the house over the next few weeks. As the weather grew warmer and sunnier, it was also getting easier to fix things or carry them without being interrupted by sudden rain or snow. Such as, for example, more chairs - as it seemed people kept gathering in their home, and Alina enjoyed it, Erik simply admitted defeat and went out by himself if it bothered him. Alina was slowly starting to worry less when he was out – he still made it a point to tell her where he was going and when to expect him, in the aftermath of last year's close call; but she no longer waited in the kitchen for him to come back every time. It was a bearable compromise, and as much as Erik hated to admit it to himself, it was slightly reassuring to know that if he was… indisposed, at least somebody would know where to find him – somebody that knew and understood the isolated places he often visited. He added a better lock on the door and some more furniture and asked Alina if there was anything at all she would like to have.

"A mirror would be nice, actually", she said. "I'll keep it in my room."

"That's all? Anything else?" he asked. "We can afford it."

"Hmmm", she tapped her finger on her nose, thinking. "The kitchen table is rocking."

"Oh, I noticed. I fixed it already, it was driving me insane."

"To be honest, we don't need that much", she shrugged. "We've had all the necessities ever since we've had a steady income."

Erik sighed, slightly frustrated, before realizing what the problem was. "Allow me to rephrase that. Is there anything you'd like to or want to have, as opposed to need, which would make you happy? Please tell me."

Alina smiled. "A couch would be nice. Better curtains. Some flower pots." she looked around. "Bookshelves. A little table we could put here", she waved her hands at the middle of the room, "you know, so we could sit at the couch, all of us, instead of at the kitchen table, and drink tea."

"Uh…"

"Speaking of books, we do need some place for you to keep your papers", she continued. "One drawer is no longer enough. I need my place to store my class notes, too. We should get you a separate shelf so you can organize your work. To put it simply, a place where one plans to live needs to have a lot of horizontal surfaces, I've found. Especially since you have the habit of putting things down when you're distracted and forgetting about them", she nodded at him.

"I do?"

"Definitely."

"But I always know where to find them."

Alina raised an eyebrow. "You didn't notice me putting them away from the table when I'm cooking and into your drawer? Or on the desk in your room?"

Erik blinked. "You've been touching my papers?"

"Saving them from natural disasters, yes. Other than that, no."

"Thank you. But don't do that, please? But… thank you?" he shook his head. "I'm sorry, I don't remember all the things you mentioned. Truth be told, I don't know what constitutes better curtains. I don't know where to buy any of these things either. I think we'll have to go to the city."

"Oh, that's alright", she grinned. "We'll ask Jack to help. I'm sure he knows, he's in the city all the time, besides, I've seen what he's done to his own house. We should all go!"

"Can we not- "

"Yana should help us decorate! She has great taste!"

"-make a huge deal of it?"

"No!" she replied cheerfully. "It'll be fun, I think."

"It's our house", he slowly raised his hands to rub his temples. "We're the only ones living in it. Shouldn't it be up to us only what we decide to do with it?"

Alina looked at him, suddenly calmer. "Maybe you're right. But we will need some help, so I propose that we do ask them. But we don't have to go overboard with it."

"That would be nice."

So, the next time Yana and Jack both came over for tea on a sunny Sunday afternoon, Alina started the subject. Erik sat a little further away, reading the papers; he usually liked being on the margin, but he would readily join in on the conversation any time he wanted to.

"We've been thinking, about whether we'd keep living here or not", Alina started. "Truth be told, I'm not too eager to move. Neither of us is."

"This is a very cozy castle, my lady", Jack nodded. "You'll be fine here a little longer."

"Yana", she turned to her. "This village has been reasonably safe for as long as I've been here. I don't think something in New York we could afford right now would be much better. What do you think?"

Yana shrugged. "Don't tell people how much money you're making. Other than that, it's alright."

"I wasn't planning to", Alina laughed.

"I mean, don't suddenly start living like a rich person, while you're still here", Yana looked at both Alina and Erik. "People here are used to being poor. They won't like it. But they like you, both of you, so you're safe. They still remember everything you did last year."

"We were going to make our house a little nicer", Alina admitted. "But nothing drastic. I just wanted it to look nice for when Amelija comes. I wanted to ask if you'd go shopping with me."

"Back home you would ask me if I can help you sew the curtains by yourself", Yana laughed. "Of course. I'll go with you."

"I keep hearing about your sister", Jack said. "I'm curious. What's she like? Is she as charming as you?"

"Tough question. She's much more charming, and much less, at the same time."

"Oh?"

"She's incredibly sweet, and also a complete bitch", Alina clarified.

"Sounds wonderful. I love her already", Jack grinned back at her.

"Yes, I feel like you might. You two have a lot in common", she rolled her eyes. "Well, it's settled then", Alina clapped her hands. "Thanks for helping us. I'm glad we're staying here."

"Now that you're ready to move up in the world, you two should start working toward full citizenship", Jack said.

"I am," Alina remembered the letters she sent to the Croatian Federation. "We need to have papers and no criminal record, and we need to have proof we've lived here for a while. Other than that it seems like random grace they bestow upon immigrants at will. Do you think they'd accept me?"

"Of course. I'm willing to throw in some extra incentive, but I don't think it will even be necessary. You'll just have to wait."

"Great." It was a big step for her, but it wasn't as if she was planning to go back.

Jack turned to Erik. "You should do the same."

"No." he shook his head.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't have any papers, and I'm still wanted back in France, which they will discover immediately if they start digging", he said, his tone flat.

"What are you wanted for?" Jack raised his eyebrows.

"Arson." He looked at Jack defiantly. "The good people of Paris think I tried to burn down Opera Garnier."

"Well, did you?" Jack asked. Alina had to congratulate him on how well he was taking all this. He didn't seem at all fazed by what he was hearing, whereas she happened to be the teeniest bit disturbed.

"I didn't try to, but it did burn. It was something of a joined effort, and a little bit of carelessness on my side", Erik said. Alina noticed he was tense as a bowstring, his spine completely straight and his hands tapping a strange rhythm on the table. "There was significant damage to the interior, but from what I've heard, it's fully repaired now."

"Did anyone die?"

"No. Only me, if my friend succeeded in convincing the police."

"I might be able to handle that", Jack sighed. "I'll see if I can get you some fake papers - you'll probably need a new name, and… I can't believe you haven't told me your last name yet."

"I don't have one", Erik grinned, completely tense and stiff as a board. Something was wrong. His face was hard to read as usual, but his eyes had a distinct look that rang all the alarms in Alina's head. Jack needs to stop. But stop what, exactly? Jack's old habit of asking very personal questions very directly hardly bothered Erik anymore once he figured out he could simply ignore any of his questions he didn't like and Jack would back down; Alina didn't understand why he couldn't just do the same now."I was disowned as a child. My mother wished for me to never be associated with her when she sol- left me, and I fully intend to respect that wish. I won't say that name aloud ever again, let alone use it", Erik finished, his face still contorted in a cruel parody of a smile.

That's so horrible, so horrible I want to cry. Alina was torn between wanting to comfort him and knowing she had to act natural and let him keep his pride so he wouldn't feel like a freak. She wished he'd told her all of this before. It was hard enough to bring him back from his fury and bitterness when he talked about things that happened to him even when they were alone – with more people around, it would be near impossible. Yana glanced at her and then desperately tried to lighten the conversation.

"In any case, you can always marry Alina and take her name", she said, smiling. Jack laughed in relief, while Alina blushed. She opened her mouth to say that she did not intend to marry someone just to chain them to her legally when she noticed Erik staring at Yana with a look she truly hoped to never see again.

"Is that very funny?" he said, purposely breathing very deeply with his voice barely a whisper. "Me being married?" Yana's eyes turned wide; she was truly afraid.

"No, it's not", Alina said in her calmest, most reassuring voice. "Being forced into marriage is unacceptable. You should - you deserve to - have a choice in the matter, not be bound to me just so you'd be a person in the

eyes of the law." She tried to choose her words carefully, but it was hard as she had no idea what exactly upset him.

For what it was worth, he was no longer looking at Yana. He shifted his gaze to Alina, with such burning fury that she wanted to just run away on the fastest boat she could find back to Croatia, so she'd never have to see that look in those yellow eyes again. That thought lasted for a brief moment until she remembered that back in Croatia some people liked to look at her like that and happened to be much better at using it to their advantage – Alina forced herself to keep looking into his eyes, not backing down. Don't let him see how afraid you are. Don't grant anyone that kind of power over you again. But, God, I am afraid. She felt her fists balling up under the table.

"My personhood is questionable one way or another", Erik whispered. "I'm afraid getting married wouldn't make me any more of a person than I am, which is not at all.
Je préfèrerais Vivre comme un fantôme.1"

Having said that, Erik stood up from the table, took his coat, and walked out the door without another word. The gnawing, poisonous voice in the back of his head went from a whisper to demanding thunderously, tell her to tell her, YOU LYING TREACHEROUS DEMON TELL HER COWARD TELL HER, and the black spots that clouded his sight only left enough of his surroundings visible that he could find his way out before he did something he would likely not remember but regret nevertheless.

The rest of them could only look frozen in shock after him as he left.

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He didn't come back that day. Or the next. Or the one after that.

The first day Alina discovered he was gone and hadn't come back to sleep, she scoured the entire island with Jack and Yana and whoever else she could think of that knew him and might've liked him enough to help. She turned every rock, looked in every corner, and did everything short of contacting the police or anyone who might feel the need to lock him up

after they find him - she was mad with worry but not yet stupid. They spent the entire day looking for him, and when it got dark they had to coerce and threaten Alina into giving up. There was no trace of him; he'd disappeared into thin air. Alina searched every single hiding place he ever showed her, every secluded beach and cave. Sadly, no matter how many of them he showed to me, he always had one more. At least if somebody had killed him or hurt him, they'd have found the body, she thought to herself. It didn't provide any consolation. Alina didn't go to work that day.

On the second day, there was still no sign of him, but Alina still had to go to work; Yana came to her to walk together in an attempt to cheer her up.

"He'll be alright", she said.

"You don't know that! He could be –" Alina's eyes were red, Yana noticed, and the dark circles under her eyes darker than normal. She looked as if she was stretched very, very thin.

"Maybe, but I don't think so. I think he's hiding", Yana offered.

"Why the hell is he hiding?"

"I'm not sure, but I think he'll be back soon. Try to relax."

"How on earth can I relax in a situation like this? How could he just leave without a trace? Normal people don't do that! You can't just get up and leave as if nothing happened!"

"I know", she sighed. "It's not very nice. But he was never really normal, to begin with."

"But – "

"It's just a crisis, Alina. Endure it. It'll pass, I'm sure." She was not sure.

"I'm not sure I can forgive him if he doesn't come soon", Alina suddenly cracked and blurted out.

Yana looked at her sharply. "You should tell him that when he comes back. It's time to learn that he can't run away when something upsets him. But don't make it a bigger problem than it is. Once he comes back, it depends on you. Remember who you are. You solve problems; you don't pour vodka on fire."

I wish I could burn down this entire island and myself with it. Alina managed to contain herself for a little more because she had to work and didn't want the kids to notice how upset she was. They all noticed, but no one said anything.

Except for Walt, of course. He noticed her distress even before she opened the classroom door that day; he had quite a nose for it. She was giving her best to seem normal, but everything about her was different: her face was tired, her tone was somehow... quieter, her remarks lacked their normal sharpness and confidence, and it seemed as if she was afraid if she said something wrong somebody might die. Walter had had the pleasure to be in many teachers' classes before as they seemed to switch him over to one another when they grew sick of him, and he wondered how he and the rest of the class would have reacted if this was some other teacher. Seeing a sign of weakness was practically an invitation to start causing total mayhem; but somehow, on that particular occasion, nobody in Walter's class seemed to take that invitation, and he wondered why. Maybe they were waiting for him to ignite that spark. He wondered why he didn't want to start taking advantage of her worn-down state, and the only answer he could think of was that he felt sorry for her. Whatever was upsetting her, seemed to put out the sharp light behind her eyes, but Walt caught himself missing it. Of course, he doubted that everyone's good behavior would continue if she kept being like this, but Walt would not be the catalyst of rebellion regardless. All he felt when he looked at her was sadness. He sat quietly in his seat that day and never uttered a word unless asked.

He had almost forgotten that he also had lessons with Teacher Alina that day after school, and apparently, so did she. As he kept sitting in his chair after the other students left, Alina raised her head, already prepared to stuff her papers back in her bag, and jumped a little when she remembered.

"Walter! Oh, I'm so sorry, I – I'll be ready in a moment", she put her things back and looked at him.

Walter wondered if it would be considered rude to ask her what was wrong. "We don't have lessons today? If you forgot, that means I'm free to go", he grinned. Normally, this would have made her laugh and tell him to get back in his seat Walter so help me-

But today, it seemed to make her more distressed. "Oh god, I'm so sorry! No, no, I promised you we'd practice reading today, don't go –" the tiny note of pleading in her voice unnerved Walter to no end. She had always been polite to him, and would apologize if she was wrong – a rare trait among adults, Walt found – but the fact she was pleading with him not to go after she'd done something wrong made him nearly jump out of his skin. It was backward and wrong.

"Are you alright?" he asked, rudeness is damned. "Did something happen?"

"Uh", she paused like a frightened deer. "No. Nothing you need to worry about."

"Uh-huh."

"In any case, we'll have a short lesson today, and then you can go. But we'll make some progress, alright?"

"Or we could go to the cake shop", Walter said. He was aware of how that sounded, but didn't care about the cake that day; he just had no clue what the hell to do when she was upset, but when he was upset she'd take him for a walk and chat with him or to the cake shop and he could only assume that was what she liked. If she was going to act like a child today, he would be alright with being the parent.

"I can get you some cake from Yana, or anything if you're hungry", she started, but rather than continue with a short speech about the importance of education she simply said, "but I simply don't feel like being in crowded places today. And I don't like sitting. I have something I need to think about, and when I do that, I usually walk."

"Can I help you?" Walter was starting to wonder what the hell was happening to him. He would have to go and trip someone in the hallway later just to feel like himself again.

"No, it really will be fine", she said, looking determined for the first time that day. "But thank you, Walt. You're a very kind young man. I will remember it." She dug around her papers looking for the exercises she had prepared for him earlier. "We'll do these today, and if you're finished I'll let you go early. I'll tell you about it another day, but I have to think first. Alright?"

"Fine."

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On the third day of Erik's disappearance, Alina did something she'd never done before: she went into his room without permission. Normally, she was immensely fond of healthy personal boundaries, and even though they were together he liked to have the option of isolating himself occasionally; she'd always respected that. Today, she was so upset and angry that she couldn't be bothered – if he had a problem with it, he was welcome to come back and tell her. She entered the room and tried to find clues as to where he might be.

His room was completely normal if a bit cluttered – he always had thousands of papers and supplies lying around everywhere so that he could reach them; while the room was clean and other things were neatly stored, remains of his recent projects were, as always, lying around for her to trip on. She sifted through them carefully – remembering where everything was like she did when she would dig through her parents' things as a child – but found nothing.

Not entirely true. She found all kinds of things, from music to blueprints, paper stars, and sketches. Some torn-out newspaper articles about cultural events in New York – none of them was this week, so that was a dead end. The sketches were also interesting – his drawings were much better than hers, but that stopped bothering her long ago – there were landscapes, buildings, and interesting scenes; but most of all, there was an

overwhelming mass of drawings representing mundane, everyday life events. Yana sewed and talked, as she often did. Piotr playing with wooden toys. Yana held Piotr in her arms and spun him around. Jack laughed, holding a glass. And then Alina. Alina making paper stars. Alina cooking – there were several of those. Alina in Central Park. Alina sleeping in an armchair with a book on her lap. Alina with flowers in her hair – that one was not a sketch; it was a beautiful, elaborate charcoal drawing and she could not imagine how or why he had been hiding it from her until now. The list went on and on, Alina offering a book, Alina smiling with the ocean outlined in the background until she found a small sketch of herself and auntie Giry playing cards in Le Havre. On the bottom of the pile, she found a drawing of auntie Giry reading over her glasses and an ancient, ghostly portrait of a beautiful, ethereal-looking woman with curly dark hair and big, sad eyes – the paper was yellowed and it was at the very bottom, looking like it hadn't been touched in ages.

The only thing he never drew, it seemed, was himself – unknown to him, that one motif was covered by her. Still, seeing his drawings reassured her somewhat that he would probably be back – the attention to detail and emotion poured over such minute details of normal life told a story of someone who wished to document and remember every single nice thing that ever happened to him.

She looked around once more.

Nothing in this room indicated he was going to leave. Even his gloves were still on the desk. It was a sudden decision, triggered by God knows what. Alina put everything back where it was and lay down on the floor to despair in peace.

There was a thick layer of dust under his bed, which she only saw from this perspective. That was expected. She couldn't be bothered to clean that thoroughly, either, and she was generally tidier than he was. There was also something else: a small folded piece of paper, on the left side of his bed, unseen from above.

If I'm snooping, I might as well do it right.

She took the small piece of paper and unfolded it, instantly recognizing auntie Giry's handwriting. It was a letter, addressed to him, and it was in French. Alina's French was quite bad still, but she could make out the general theme of the letter. She took it with her to the kitchen, along with a small French-English dictionary she'd bought a month ago, and tried to decipher it.

The date on the letter said last November – before they even kissed, and the letter was a sweet, heartfelt message about how Antoinette wished him happiness and how he deserved it. Nothing unexpected and nothing that would make him leave.

Probably the opposite, Alina realized. He keeps it under his bed to have it near him in his weaker moments – it looked worn as if it had been read many times. It made sense.

What puzzled Alina was the sentence "Alina comprendra." Why was it in the future tense? Was she translating this wrong? No, not. Why not "Alina comprend"? It was probably nothing, but it still bothered her. "Alina will understand." I'd hate to disappoint her, but I understand nothing right now.

The rain started pouring in buckets outside on the evening of the third day of Erik's absence. Alina sat in the kitchen reading auntie Giry's letter over and over, drowning in panicked tears, when she heard a soft knock on the door.

Chapter 20:Confessions

Alina nearly fell over in her hurry to open the door, and saw him standing there, looking like a complete mess.

She wanted to shout at him because she had specifically asked him not to do this and now he's done it again and she almost lost her mind waiting for him and wondering what in the world happened. What the hell came over him to disappear for three entire days? What has he been doing? Where has he been sleeping?

Having taken just one glance at him, it was clear to her that he probably hadn't slept much since he left. The small part of the skin around his eyes that was not covered by the mask was puffy and colored with dark purple circles. His hair was disheveled and he seemed to be a little bit unstable on his feet. At first, it looked like he was drunk, but looking into his eyes Alina saw that they are completely lucid, except…

Frenzied. Panicked. Desperate. He looked like a man preparing to be executed. He watched her intently, and she blinked in confusion.

What in the hell? The sight was so disturbing that her anger dissipated immediately. If she didn't know him, she'd be terrified at the sight; he looked like a madman escaping from an asylum. She realized he must have hidden somewhere isolated for three days; otherwise, someone would have called the police upon seeing him. She'd seen people with this look before, and it meant trouble.

But it's my Erik. He's home. Alina didn't feel afraid when she looked at him; she could barely feel anger at that first moment. The only thing she felt was the need to hug him and ask him if he was alright.

"Are you alright?" she asked numbly, and the question rang absurdly through the silent room.

He didn't answer, just stood there, breathing as if he had just run a thousand miles. Alina realized it would be best to get him inside and safe and make sure he didn't do something even stupider. He seemed close to collapsing already.

"Please, come in. I've been waiting for you to come back." She moved aside so that he could pass.

He stood still for another moment, and she was halfway deciding to just grab his sleeve and pull him inside, but thankfully, he snapped out of it and quickly entered, his movements seemingly twitchy, jerky, more ghost-like than before. Alina closed the door behind him, suddenly wishing the door had several more locks.

He shrugged off his coat and threw it on the chair wordlessly, turning to look at her. His shirt was hanging off of his emaciated frame – looking slightly more emaciated than usual, or is my mind playing tricks on me? – wrinkled and dirty and slightly tattered. It was the one Alina had bought for him months ago – simple, white, with no embellishments, made exactly for him. Alina had bought it out of curiosity, to see if he would wear something that isn't black if it suited him well; he wore it all the time, and, well, now it was probably ruined. Life's futility is summed up in one object. I should put it in a museum as an exhibit and title it "I tried".

"Sit down. Drink this tea, all of it –" she gestured at the table – "and wait until I make you something to eat."

"We need to talk", he said. His face was hidden behind the mask and his tone hollow, but his eyes were flickering with fear.

"Oh, we do need to talk", Alina replied through her teeth. "And we will, soon enough. But not until you've done something rational for a change. I will talk when I'm convinced you can still act like you've got some sense left in you."

Curiously, that did produce an effect. Erik seemed to become aware of how insane he looked and sounded, and he obediently sat down to pour himself some tea. Alina quickly sliced some bread, added a few things, and put them in front of him; just butter and jam because she had no idea how his starved stomach would react to anything hard to digest.

"Thank you", he said, taking one. Alina waited until he'd eaten three before she started to talk.

"Can you explain what exactly you've been doing?" she said, in a very, very controlled manner. The correct thing to ask was probably "Are you alright? What did we do to upset you? What happened to you?" but she wasn't very concerned with saying the correct thing.

"I had to think," he said, suddenly looking at the sandwich in his hand like it was the most interesting thing in the world.

"Think? Has it occurred to you to maybe think of me?" Alina slowly let out just a tiny bit of poison she wanted to shoot at him, just enough so she wouldn't explode with the pressure of it.

He looked back at her. "That's all I've been doing."

"Really? Really? Your idea of being considerate is running off for three days while I tear down this island looking for you, pull out half my hair and almost go mad with worry?" She was whispering now, in a voice she rarely used. It was reserved for special situations, and it was the same voice she spoke in when she told her father she wasn't coming home from London after her studies finished. Amelija once told her it made her sound "creepy". He noticed, too. Abused children are infallible at sensing danger.

"I was fine. There was no need for that," he said, and hearing that sentence she snapped completely; it felt like a slap to her face. Alina felt a hot flash of fury and she stood up, taking her empty cup and hurling it, full force, into the wall behind her. She had only so much composure to not throw it at him, or just start hitting him, because she felt if she did that he'd never forgive her.

Never hitting people was a personal oath Alina took years ago, and this was the first time she'd almost broken it. I'll congratulate myself later for my restraint. She turned back to him, staring at her in shock and alarm.

"No need for that? A year ago you almost died! I sat by your bed for two days while you were unconscious and prayed to every angel in heaven that you come back to me! You are completely selfish, immature, you, you asshole! Do you think you can just do as you please and tell people how to react to it?" she was shouting now, unable to think clearly. Everything she says now will probably be gibberish, she realized. "You think it's alright to just disappear whenever I feel like I can trust you? Do you even give the slightest damn about how I feel?"

His eyes were wide with shock, but he didn't respond.

"Answer me!" Alina shouted. The only remaining fragment of control she had was going into making sure she didn't get too close or wave her hands toward his face. He flinched and spoke, raising his voice as well.

"Yes, of course, I do!"

"I doubt it! From where I'm standing, it looks like you wish to keep me at a safe distance!"

Amelija once said that the best way to keep a man is to keep him at a safe distance. But I'm not Amelija, and I don't play games. Either I'll have someone I can truly lean on or I won't bother with any of this anymore. Alina was aware that all this shouting and rage wasn't making her seem charming or seductive or worth staying with, but she didn't care. If he left her for it, she'd be devastated, but it was better than suffering silently and fearing his next absence for the rest of her life.

"Yes, I do!" he yelled, standing up. "A safe distance for you! Because I care about you!"

"If you cared about me you would not have abandoned me!" she shouted and having said it, her rage deflated like a balloon. Something incredibly ancient and long forgotten inside Alina floated to the surface and tore a

crack in the wall upon which she stood as she shouted. He opened his mouth to retort but stopped himself when she sat back down. Alina closed her eyes and breathed deeply, resting her forehead on her palm and doing her best not to cry. She was not entirely successful at it.

Alina had always thought of herself as a relatively sensible, composed person; one that put others' needs before her own, and one that said the right thing to get the right effect. It was a whole tower of rationalization, repression, and defense mechanisms that had been enabling her to live as an independent and highly efficient, functional adult; and it had just crumpled to the ground. She had built that tower out of heavy bricks and stones, upon a simple truth she'd learned as a very young girl:

I am alone.

I wonder if that stupid bastard will even realize how I feel.

"I'm sorry", he whispered.

Alina shook her head. "I don't care."

"I am sorry", he repeated quickly. He stood up, reaching out with his arms weakly; drawing back when she didn't respond. Alina didn't want to look at him, but she could hear his voice changing. "Sorry, sorry, I am sorry", he repeated, "Désolé, Je suis désolé1", he kept whispering desperately, walking around the room, "Je suis désolé, désolé, désolé… mon Dieu, je suis désolé" he paced around like possessed, and she was so surprised that she turned to look at him. He was pacing around frantically, whispering to himself, running his hands through his hair and over his masked face.

"Désolé, désolé…"

Alina started to worry that her angry outburst may have pushed him over the edge since he was already bursting at the seams when he returned – if I just caused him a nervous breakdown I'll never forgive myself, but as soon as she lifted her head he managed to stop and look at her. For a moment they stared at each other in bewilderment.

"Je suis désolé", he repeated one more time, looking directly into her eyes.

"So am I."

"You have no reason to be", He said after a moment of silence, seemingly remembering how to speak English.

"I still am."

One more moment of silence, and he spoke again, very slowly, as if he was pulling every word out of himself by sheer force.

"I never meant to upset you", he swallowed, "and I want you to know, no matter what else you hear today, that I…" his voice cracked and he started again. "I want nothing more than to be close to you. I never wanted to leave you, ever. But I think I still may have to, in the end."

"Why?" she asked, feeling her eyes well up again.

"Because… I may have deluded you into thinking I'm someone better than I am, and I can't keep doing that because the further the lie goes, the better you think I am, and the less I deserve you. You need to hear the truth now and judge for yourself, and if you want, I'll leave afterward and you'll never see me again." He sighed. "I was contemplating doing that before, sparing my dignity and leaving you with a false memory, but I couldn't do it, I had to come back and see you one more time. You deserve to make this choice, I see that now, otherwise, I'm just inflicting more hurt upon you than I ever thought I would. It's up to you and what you decide. This is the best I can do."

"What?" was all she could say. What?

Erik took a very deep breath.

As Alina calmed down, he lowered himself into his usual seat across from her, wondering if this would be the last time he sits in it. She must have been in his room, he realized – Antoinette's letter was on the table next to

her, resting on a dictionary, and next to it was a piece of paper with one sentence written in both English and French.

Alina will understand.

Tell her, the thought floated once again from the back of his head, but it no longer hissed in his ear; it pleaded quietly in Antoinette's gentle voice and so Erik took another deep breath to steady himself – it did nothing – and started talking.

"There is something you need to know about me, Alina, and I'll let you judge it for yourself. I would gladly deceive you until the end of my days and steal away pieces of happiness if you weren't so persistently kind to me all the time. I can't bear to see you waste that kindness blindly on someone who doesn't deserve it."

"What do you mean? What happened?" Alina felt her heartbeat drumming in her ears.

"A lot of things happened, and too many of them were my fault, even as I tried to tell myself otherwise. I need you to know what I am.

The reason why I had to escape France was that I... kidnapped a woman. Nearly killed her fiancé, too, and if wasn't for Giry I would not have had the restraint not to kill many more people while I lived in the Opera."

"I... You might need to start again, slower this time. I don't understand."

Erik had to take another deep breath, wishing his heart would stop beating so frantically and his voice and hands would stop shaking – none of which happened. He couldn't look directly at her, but he could tell by her voice that she did understand. She just didn't want to believe it.

"I'll start from what you already know about me. When Antoinette found me, she couldn't keep me in her apartment forever, so she took me to Opera Garnier. I was around sixteen at the time. The Opera has an immense cellar – five very large floors of it – so I lived there for over a decade. I lived off of food and supplies I could steal from the staff and workers. I couldn't risk

being seen, and I was so immensely bored and lonely that I built an entire house for myself in the cellars and learned to – draw, sing, and play every instrument I could get my hands on. I studied, I read, and I lived peacefully for the first time in my life. I was afraid people might become curious and try to wander down; my first instinct was to simply kill anyone who might threaten me and my anonymity. It was only Giry's persistent, stubborn arguing which convinced me that I shouldn't act like an animal just because people think I am because it's easier. She raised me, made me into a… person, and in the end, partially for her own sake, I agreed to simply exist as a mirage without bothering anyone. People noticed things missing, and they noticed strange accidents, but they simply said the place was haunted and started blaming it on the Opera Ghost. They weren't aware I even existed.

One day Giry brought an orphan girl, her daughter's friend, to dance in the ballet. The girl's name was Christine, and I steered clear of her for several years. I was still very much wild at that time. Giry was the only person in the world who knew of my existence, and I was horrified of people, so I stayed in the shadows and lived rather peacefully. But after a while, I felt drawn to her. I needed to talk to someone since Giry was becoming so overwhelmed with her duties that she couldn't come very often. The girl seemed lost, alone, and sad, and so was I. One day I spoke to her when she was all alone. I stayed in the shadows because I was still horrified at the thought of revealing myself.

I'll spare you the details. The girl was shy and withdrawn, but she was immensely talented at singing. She had both the voice and the emotion to be a legend, a diva one day. I started teaching her – never meeting her face-to-face – and I'm afraid I hid enough of what I truly am from her to have her believe I was a completely benevolent presence in her life. She wasn't entirely sure I wasn't just a ghost – young choir girls spread silly superstitions – or some man in the shadows, but she was so lonely that she chose to believe everything I said. She trusted me completely, and I chose to disregard my conscience because I had fallen in love with her. Madly and desperately. I ignored everything else in the world for a while."

He noticed Alina wince a little when she heard that last part. Unfortunately, she is about to wince a lot more.

"The sad truth was that she never loved me back. She may have been obsessed with the image I had so carefully crafted, of a perfect ethereal guardian, but once she learned the truth I became an absolute disappointment – imagine dreaming something like that and learning your dear angel was… a rather insane, malformed man. I can't bring myself to blame her. She fell in love with someone else – a young handsome nobleman – and I found out about it. Needless to say, I didn't take it well. I'm afraid I'd said some things that made her fear me from then on."

He didn't want to say this next part, but he knew if he didn't say it now he would never have the strength to do this again. And I have to say it because she has to know what she's dealing with, and I have to know I didn't do the same horrifying thing all over again to someone else. Even if someone does the same horrifying thing again to me.

"Since I'm rather talented for music myself, after a good number of lessons and rehearsals I had managed to train both her voice and her confidence, and eventually she got a lead role. I only had to arrange some minor accidents for that to happen, but once she got it, she was perfect. She became the center of attention practically overnight, and the success made her trust me again, but it also made her much bolder. The next time I saw her she felt the need to take my mask off by surprise to see why on earth I would be hiding my face from her, and the truth, I'm afraid, made her even less inclined to stay with me. She no longer needed me, but I was still delusional that she would somehow magically want to stay with me, and I went from being a benevolent guardian to an absolute menace. We argued I shouted, I followed her, I manipulated and threatened her, and I accused her of anything I feared she might do. In the end, my fears came true. She attempted to escape my reach by running away with her dear sweet noble-boy, which I also found out. So, I kidnapped her. In the middle of an opera, too. It was a massive, unforgivable scandal, and all of Paris rose to drag me out like a beast with torches and pitchforks. I took her to my home and had every intention of keeping her there when her fiancé – who possessed a lot more courage than I had anticipated – came to rescue her. I managed to

capture him, too. I'm not sure how, because I had been slowly going mad over those few months and some things are still blurry. But I captured him alive and decided in my insanity to negotiate his release with her. That part I remember and I won't pretend I have an excuse for it. I offered to let him go only if she stayed with me, otherwise, I would kill him."

Erik had to stop again because he'd lost both his voice and his sight. He realized he'd started crying and covered his face with his hands to compose himself for a moment. He still couldn't look at Alina and decided it would be easier to continue talking like this, with his face in his hands. Are you an insane beast or a whiny child? Decide already.

"She agreed to stay. I could see at that moment she hated me to her very bones, but she decided to stay with me so I wouldn't kill him, because, you see, she loved him that much. She came up to me, told me she would stay, and kissed me. My head cleared completely when she did it and I realized everything I had done. I couldn't bear to be the monster in that story. I couldn't bear the thought of keeping her there with me and looking at her every day knowing she was trapped, knowing she hates me. So I let them both go. I promised never to contact her again. From what I've read, they're now married, and she's still performing. They ran back up, let me down in the cellar and I narrowly escaped the righteous mob; I hid in Giry's room and for some reason, she decided to take me back to her home and offer me another chance. But the good people of Paris were after my head so I had to escape, which is how I met you."

There was a game Erik sometimes played when he couldn't decipher how Alina would feel: he pretended it was someone else instead of him in that situation with her, someone normal. He'd found it often cleared his head of interrupting thoughts and gave him a more balanced, rational view of things; it predicted her behavior better than what he'd normally guess. But this time he dared not even think about how she would react if anyone, he or else, told her the things he'd just told her. He waited silently for her verdict, trying not to think, deciding he'd rather keep his face hidden for a while longer. For the first time in forever, his head was silent. Maybe ruining everything good in my life is enough for you to finally shut up.

He could hear her getting up from her seat without saying a word. Is that it? It was rather cruel, but maybe rather fitting. Maybe it was less cruel than actually voicing out her opinion of him after hearing everything. And thank god I can't see her. I might stay like this forever.

He could hear her footsteps getting closer, stopping right next to where he was sitting; he could hear her leaning on the table. He waited, terrified of what would happen next, unable to figure out what she was doing.

He felt her fingers gently tugging on his wrists and recoiled in shock. What?

"I'm not touching your mask. Calm down. I just want to see your eyes."

"What are you-" he started to turn the other way, hoping he could maybe find a hole to crawl in.

"No, come on, it's alright. It's just hard to see you like this. I always wanted to do this but I was scared you'd get angry. You're too proud of your good." She continued, gently tugging on the tips of his fingers. "Every time you're miserable, I just want to reach out and embrace you, but you're so… I never knew how you'd react. Come on. Please."

It made no sense, but he gave in anyway and let her pull his hands away. He kept looking down, but he could sort of make out that she was looking at him, still holding his hands in hers on her lap.

"I'm not going to beat you, hurt you, or leave you. I just want to talk."

He didn't know what to say.

Neither did Alina, so she just said the first thing that came to mind.

"I don't think you're a monster."

That statement was so painfully untrue that he started sobbing again.

"No, really, you're not. What you did was wrong, and I won't deny that. You've done some bad things. But you're not a monster. You did the right thing in the end." She lifted his chin with her finger, forcing him to look at

her. Her face was… normal. Gentle and warm. It was no different from before, and he could see no signs of disgust or loathing. "People make mistakes, and they sometimes do horrible things they regret, but they're still people. I can understand you were in a horrible situation. I can understand you had no way to know any different. I can understand you'd been treated like a beast your whole life. But what I find the most important thing of all is that you did the right thing when it mattered. Once, but once was enough. And you can be proud of that, even if you're not proud of other things you've done."

"But-" she cut him off abruptly by sitting on his lap and embracing him.

"Be quiet. We'll talk more later, trust me."

Erik stayed silent against his better judgment, and slowly returned her embrace. He slowly fell into a sort of peaceful trance and forgot everything else for some time. He couldn't tell how long they stayed like that; he may have fallen asleep for some time.

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They indeed had to talk some more later; Alina simply saw no point in discussing some of it while they were both on edge and irrational, but there were some details in the story she found important to understand to think about her decision. It was ironic, she thought, sort of a cruel joke from the universe itself - Alina herself feared being bound and controlled more than anything her entire life. She had spent her life first judging her parents for trying to break her down and keep her tame; then talking to victims of all sorts of tragedy and abuse - and she wasn't new to the notion that people who have been wronged often go on to wrong others; she even had ample sympathy and understanding for those people in most cases. She just thought it kind of a cruel joke that it would happen like this - that she would have to confront her worst fears outside the safety of her professional persona, with the person she felt closest to.

She sat next to him, taking one of his hands in hers. Erik still found it hard to look at her, but less so now, as he clasped her hand lightly.

"If you wanted her to belong to you, why did you help her become famous? Why pursue her dreams and build her confidence if you could just keep her bound and dependent on you?"

He was appalled. "Is that what you think of me? That I want a puppet instead of a person?"

"No, but that's what you think, how you talk about it. But it's not what you did."

"Maybe this line of thinking simply didn't occur to me at the time", he offered bitterly.

"But it would have occurred to you if you wanted it. And yet you helped her sing to the whole world instead of just you. Why? Did you want her to owe you everything so that you can blackmail her later?" she was looking at him sharply.

"I had nothing to blackmail her with at that point." He didn't understand this line of questions, but he had already decided he'd tell her everything she wished to know and there was no going back now.

"Why, then? Were you hoping she would owe you and stay with you out of guilt?"

That was enough to make him angry now. "Alright, maybe I was!" he waved his free hand, raising his voice in annoyance. "Maybe I thought about all those things, and maybe I just wanted to steal her away, no matter what she wanted! But has it occurred to you that maybe, I saw that she wanted it, and, and, and I would have personally given everything to have a chance to go into the world and perform, and someone to teach me, and a normal face and normal mind – and I maybe, without hidden motives, wanted to give her things I couldn't give to myself, perhaps just because I did love her and wanted to see her happy! Maybe it made me happy to see her fulfill her dreams!"

Alina smiled mischievously. "Yes, that's what I thought. Now, I've read quite several stories and that's not really what monsters do, is it?"

Was that a trick? "I suppose not."

"Not everything you wanted was completely bad then, was it?"

"No, but I still managed to drag her through hell with my best intentions."

"Hmm." She frowned. "That you probably did. You messed it up completely. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to remind me", he retorted bitterly.

"No, I suppose not. It looks to me like you've realized since then why manipulating and lying to someone you love might be a bad thing. I haven't seen you do anything similar since I've known you. You've been very kind. And you haven't harmed anybody as you promised." She smiled. "Now, there's another very important question."

"Ask away." he braced himself for the impact.

"Do you still love Christine?" She was trying to sound carefree and amused, but it was hilariously obvious how much she feared the answer. She'd taken him by surprise again; he did not expect this question at all. He took a second to think.

"I don't think I do. I don't know. I'm angry when I think about it all. And I can't erase what happened." Her face fell into sadness, so he continued quickly. "But… I don't want it anymore. I don't want her. I've made peace with it some time ago, actually, and… truthfully, I met you", he blurted out. He wasn't ready for big confessions, but she deserved to hear something nice at least after all she'd endured so far. "It wasn't a sudden switch. I just wanted to be near you, and gradually stopped thinking about… that. About her."

"Is that it? I'm a nice distraction?" Her eyes were drilling holes in him. Please, calm down.

"No, absolutely not. But I'd rather tell you sometime later when we're not discussing the… more horrible things."

"Tell me what?" she was only half convinced. Erik's nerves, however, were at their very frayed ends and had been for a while.

"You stubborn woman! I wasn't going to tell you I love you in the middle of this stupid mess, because I wanted to do it right, and pick a better moment, but fine! Have it your way!"

Her eyes widened in shock. "Say that again, please."

"I love you, alright! I said it already!" I'm not very mature today, am I?

But neither was she. She just kept looking at him, smiling.

"What is so funny?"

"Sorry", she said, "this is the first time a man has told me he loves me, and I have to say, you should say it annoyed and yelling at me. I might have lost another bet with Amelija." She started to laugh. "You silly, blind man. I have loved you for a long time. Maybe I should have been more obvious about it, but I think you're incredible and have thought so since I came to know you."

"I'm confused. Which part of what I just told you is wonderful?"

"None of it. I already told you what I think about it all. But I can accept it, and move on, I think. It's not my place to offer you forgiveness but I can offer you acceptance. You can forgive yourself, of course."

"I don't know. I don't think I should."

"That's fair. It's up to you. I think the way you told me the story is important. I would not still be here if I didn't think you understood your own mistakes." She paused to drill a hole in his skull again. "And I would not be here if I thought you had any intention of trying to do the same to me. I value my freedom very highly, as you may have noticed. It seems that you don't intend to take it away."

"I don't." But he thought it was understandable that she had to check. "If you wish to leave, I won't stop you." Even if I'm not entirely certain what

would be left of me in that case.

"I wasn't planning to." She grinned. "Déjà vu, hah. What I meant is, if we take into account that I have no intention whatsoever to leave you and sincerely want to be with you, which I do – don't look at me like that, just listen – I want you to understand that still need some freedom. I am very loyal and very faithful, trust me. But aside from that, I want to be able to do and say what I want as I have been doing until now. I want to work, I want to have friends, and I like to have a choice in my own life. I won't try to force my will on anything; I just want us to be able to compromise. I want us to tell each other everything openly, with no secrets, no pretenses, and no manipulations. And I'd like you to consider telling me things that bother you rather than running away randomly. I want you to try and trust me because I'll do my best to earn it. And I want to be able to trust you. Can we do that?"

"I'll try." Honestly, I've never been in this situation, so I don't know.

"Alright. I'll try that too. I've never been in this situation either, but we've been getting along very nicely until now. I think I can trust you." She smiled. "It's a big thing for me, although you may think otherwise."

"Please", he scoffed. "You're manipulative as all hell towards most people. Don't think I haven't noticed, even if they're stupid enough to buy it."

"Oh. Fair." She shrugged.

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One shouldn't spend three days without eating or sleeping, it seemed. Erik could distinctly remember being able to pull that off when he was younger, but… oh well. After his return, he had to spend two more days sleeping and eating soup because he was, for all intents and purposes, useless. He was unfocused, emotionally unstable, and uncharacteristically clumsy, so in an attempt to just spare everyone the hassle he stayed in bed.

Alina let him sleep without disturbance for the first day, only coming to bring him something to eat and some books – he wasn't sure if she thought

he'd read them, or she realized how effectively trying to read in this state put him to sleep.

On the second day, she brought some oatmeal for breakfast and lingered on, shifting nervously.

"Is something wrong?" Erik asked, sitting up in the bed.

"I was just wondering. Do you want to be alone?" she asked, looking to the side.

"What do you mean?" He didn't like the question at all.

"I meant right now. Is it alright if I sit next to you?"

"Yes, of course, it's alright. Go ahead." He had just woken up, so he was neither anxious nor unfocused. I might be good company, even.

He expected her to pull up the chair from his desk and sit next to the bed, but instead, she went around and climbed, slowly and somewhat shyly, on the bed next to him. She pulled her knees to her chest and embraced them with her arms, in a very child-like gesture.

"I missed you while you were gone", she admitted.

Erik wasn't sure what to say.

"I'm sorry I left. I wasn't thinking clearly."

"That's very obvious, yes. I just wanted to make it clear, since I've already made my anger known, that I did miss you and I'm glad you came back."

I love you with all of my heart and I'll never leave you again. "I won't do that again", he managed.

"That would be very much appreciated. You can trust me, you know. Please try to."

"I do trust you." I am yours completely. Do what you want with me.

"Good." She smiled. "I trust you, too." She shifted a bit closer to rest her cheek on his shoulder.

Erik wasn't sure how it happened, but at some point, he fell asleep and when he woke up he was on his back and she was still there, sleeping softly with her head resting on his chest and her arms wrapped around him. I do trust her because I don't think I've ever fallen asleep with someone other than her as much as in the same room, much less in my bed. The exhaustion may have helped as well. Erik wrapped one arm tightly around her, lightly stroking her hair with the other – she merely sighed in her sleep – and wondered if this may be what the word serenity means.

The news of Erik's return reached his friends quickly – well, Alina went to tell everybody on the same day because she raised half the island on its feet and now she had to calm them down. He felt guilty about it – he never should have let his anger get the better of him; its effect seemed to be diminishing, and yet, he never quite managed to not mess something up.

Yana came to visit him as soon as he was out of bed, and Erik was thankful it was just her – he felt a pang of guilt when he realized what a scene he had caused, but as he opened the door for her she simply smiled at him without anger or disdain. Yana was particular about that – he almost felt as if he could one day tell her everything he had told Alina, and she still wouldn't judge him about it; it was unlikely that day would come soon, but the thought filled him with affection nevertheless.

"You made a mess", Yana stated calmly, looking at him.

"I'm sorry", he bowed his head at her. He wasn't sure what else to say.

"I don't know what we did to upset you, but I'm sorry also", she said, slowly pulling him into a gentle hug. She held him for a second while Erik tapped her back awkwardly and then pulled away. "Don't do that again, stupid man, or I'll murder you", she said with the same calm, loving voice as she slid past him and sat at the kitchen table.

Alina made them all tea; after the initial awkwardness, they had somehow slowly started talking about the whole incident quite openly when they

realized Erik wouldn't shut off and lose his composure again, and when Erik realized they wouldn't suddenly decide they did hate him after all.

"How did you even hide like that? Where? We searched everywhere", Alina asked.

"A magician never reveals his secrets, Alina", Erik smiled. He had always, always been good at hiding; it was a skill he was quite proud of. No one had ever been able to find him, save from Giry on a few occasions.

"He keeps moving", Yana interrupted, annoyed with his attitude. "He moved all the time between several connected places instead of picking one very hidden place. He was always in a place we searched already. He used times when we were distracted or tired to hide - in plain sight, is that how you say? He picks an obvious place and looks like he belongs there. I think one time he was behind us."

Alina and Erik looked at her in stunned silence. Erik knew very well what she was talking about; he indeed was behind them at one point. The small makeshift search party Alina had gathered horrified him to the bone; he was not ready to be snuffed out by another righteous mob. He had half a mind to leave the island without another word, but some strange masochism made him want to look at her again, to try and decipher what would make her betray him like this. He followed Alina and Yana around until they were alone, from a safe distance where they couldn't see him – only to see Alina break down and cry inconsolably as soon as there was nobody else around. Yana tried to comfort her but to no avail. He could barely make out what they were saying, but the one sentence he could decipher was "what if something horrible happened to him?". It was at that moment he realized the mistake he'd made; the woman he was running away never to face again was crying at the thought of never seeing him again and it made him so disgusted at himself to be the cause of it that he could hardly bear it; he decided at that moment that he would have to go home. It just took him two more days to gather the courage (and the rain that started pouring on the third day was a compelling incentive to finally do it).

"How did you know that?" Erik managed. Yana never gave a single sign of noticing him.

"It just makes sense. It's what I would do. I don't know how people think it's so hard."

"Are you saying you knew where I was? You could find me?"

"I don't know, I didn't try. It's not hard to guess what you do, but it's still hard to find you. You're fast."

"You didn't try?" Alina says. "But why- it was three days - how could you-"

"He is an adult, Alina, and needs to learn to come back alone", Yana cut her off before turning to Erik. "I didn't like how you looked at me before you left- it was scary, so I didn't want to find you until you get back to normal. I thought you will know when you are ready."

Erik didn't know what to say.

"You came back alone, so that's fine", Yana clarified.

"I'm sorry I scared you", he mumbled back. It seemed he'd have to say that a lot in the following days.

"It's over now", Alina chimed in. It sounded more like a plea than a statement.

Chapter 21:Language

Autumn of 1882, Paris

"What's your name?" Antoinette asked the crouching figure as they sped through the dark streets quietly. The figure gave no sign of understanding or even hearing her question; it simply continued walking next to her with its limbs shaking slightly under the cloak and weirdly-colored eyes flickering beneath the scarf and hood that wrapped around its entire face and head. The figure moved like its limbs were being properly used for the first time in a long time, such a long time that it forgot what they were for; trembling and walking with quick, twitchy movements underneath the long hooded cloak. Antoinette knew the right and wrong times to push things, so she kept silent until they reached her apartment. She automatically took out her keys, but then changed her mind and turned to the cloaked apparition again before unlocking the door.

Remembering that Meg was already asleep, Antoinette brought her finger to her lips and turned to the hooded figure, signaling to keep quiet.

The figure stared back at her. She sighed a little and tried again, wondering if she and her daughter would both be found dead in the morning.

"This is my apartment. You can stay here. Just... be quiet, I suppose", she said. "My daughter is asleep."

The figure stared at her some more, standing completely still.

"I know you're not deaf", she said, slightly annoyed. "Just tell me if you understand or not, then I'll let you inside."

The figure brought one long, thin, bony finger up to the part of the scarf where its lips probably were.

"Good enough", Antoinette mumbled, unlocking the door. She opened the door and held it, gesturing for the figure to come in. It stood in the doorway for a few moments before slowly stepping inside.

"Make yourself comfortable. I'll get you some tea and something to eat", she said. Taking off her coat and hat, she put the pot of water on the stove and started searching for something to make for the figure to eat, until she turned around again and saw it still standing in the hallway looking at her intently the whole time.

Antoinette looked at the figure looking back at her and slowly said, "Make yourself comfortable. That means you can sit and take your coat off. You're my guest now."

The figure stood in the hallway.

"Please, sit down", she said, pulling out a chair. When it still stood, she walked up to it and tried again.

"Come on", she said, reaching out to gently pull the fabric of the cloak. The figure moved so remarkably fast that she couldn't even see it properly, but it was suddenly two steps away from her.

Antoinette blinked and then slowly raised both her hands in a peaceful gesture. "I'm not going to hurt you. Ever. I swear on my life. I just want you to follow me. Alright?"

The figure stood there but didn't move further back. Antoinette kept her hands up and gestured at the kitchen, then moved one step backward, still facing the hooded figure.

Very, very slowly, the figure took one step forward. Antoinette's face spread into a sincere smile, and the figure blinked in surprise.

"Very good. One more?" she took another step back, and the figure stepped forward again, much quicker this time.

Antoinette walked slowly backward until she reached the table, then pulled out a chair and moved a few steps away from it. She turned her back to the table to get out the already-boiling pot of tea away from the stove. When she turned back around, the figure was sitting in the chair still wrapped in cloak and scarf, looking at her intently.

"You can take off the cloak", she moved like she was pulling down a hood and shrugging off her coat. The bright yellow eyes looked at her for a moment, and then the figure pulled down the hood and wriggled out of the cloak, revealing a mass of long, tangled, dirty black hair and something that may have been a shirt and pair of trousers at some point, but was now quite literally rags.

"...and the scarf", she pointed at the figure's face and neck. "So you can eat."

For the first time, the figure made a gesture that may have been an attempt to communicate - it shook its head lightly, looking at her.

"You'll have to, sooner or later. You can't eat through it", she said gently.

The figure shook its head again.

"Would you rather starve than take it off?" she asked slowly, keeping her voice equally gentle.

The figure nodded.

"Huh." that was, though understandable, undeniably problematic. Antoinette already shed the tears she was going to shed today as she was preparing to go break into a cage, and now she only felt calm determination.

"If I get you something else to cover your face with, so you can eat, would that help?" she asked.

The figure did not move.

Antoinette sighed. She had plenty of stage props she sometimes brought home to fix; she could maybe find a mask or something among them -

maybe that would appease the ghostly figure. It seemed less uneasy already, no longer staring at her; but what upset her was that its eyes were now darting back and forth across the room, fixating on some invisible points as if they noticed something there that nobody else could see. She put a plate of baked potatoes she had left over from lunch on the table, as well as the tea she made, and excused herself to go look for something that would help the situation.

She found a plain white leather mask - a basic mask that she used to have tons of; they were often used in theatre and ballet as they were versatile and could be customized for many different roles. She cut a hole where a person's jaw and mouth would be so that the ghost could eat without taking it off, and went back to the kitchen.

When Antoinette came back, the figure still sat in the chair unmovingly, but the plate of potatoes was empty, as well as the cup of tea.

"Ah", she laughed. "You were hungry, after all?"

The ghost stared at her, flinching slightly at the sudden sound of her laughter.

"Here you go", she put the mask on the table in front of the ghost. "Would this help?"

The ghost blinked once, then reached for the mask to look at it.

"You can put it on."

The ghost had no intention of taking the scarf off.

"Alright, I'll leave so you can do it in peace", she pointed at the clock on the wall. "I'll come back in five minutes. When this arrow is here", she said as she showed it on the clock and left. She waited in the hallway for exactly five minutes, and when she came back, the scarf was gone from the ghost's face, replaced by a mask.

The ghost looked decidedly less ghostly now. It even resembled an emaciated, badly-scarred teenage boy.

"Hello", she smiled at him again, and his eyes widened in surprise again as she did.

"I don't think I've introduced myself", she continued. "My name is Antoinette. You can stay with me for a while if you want to. You'll be my guest, I'll give you more food and clothes and I'll bandage these", she pointed at his wrists and forearms, "because they look like they hurt. Do you want to? Stay here with me?"

The boy looked at her, not sure how to respond. Yes, he wanted desperately to be somewhere where he'd get food and smiles instead of beatings and shouting, but the entire situation seemed so ridiculously wonderful that he wasn't entirely sure he hadn't lost his mind and simply imagined this whole evening.

If that was the case, seeing as he had already lost his sanity, he had hardly anything left to lose. That was a compelling argument, and the boy nodded at the smiling woman once.

"Alright. It might be a good idea for you to take a bath first, and then we'll take a look at those. Now, you don't have to tell me right now, but I imagine you do have a name. Will you tell me, one day? When you're ready?"

The boy looked back at her, thinking. He did have a name once, long ago, he was quite sure of that. He would probably be able to recall what that name was if he thought hard enough; however, along with that memory came other memories he truly did not wish to resurface. At least not today. He was fairly certain, somewhere in the back of his head, that they would come back on their own eventually no matter what he did or wanted.

He nodded once more, and she smiled again, softly, and almost reached out to pat his back before she remembered he might not react too well to that. The boy, still lost in thought, didn't notice her arm moving slightly; he suddenly had a fairly disturbing realization that in this quiet, peaceful,

wonderfully non-threatening house, the screaming inside his head suddenly sounded much louder in comparison than before.

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Summer of 1876, Paris

The little girl standing in the middle of the sidewalk cried so loudly that it was impossible nobody heard her - everybody definitely heard her, but until Antoinette stopped dead in her tracks upon passing her and turned around, nobody did anything.

The girl was about eight years old, dressed in a neat yellow dress with her dark hair braided down her back. Her eyes, now puffy and red, were also dark, and her skin had an olive tint to it that made Antoinette think she might not be French.

"Hey, hey, dear", she called. "What's wrong?"

The girl looked at her with confusion - no, she was probably not French, as she didn't seem to understand a word of what Antoinette just said. Antoinette wasn't going to give up so easily, so she kneeled in front of the girl and looked into her eyes.

"Uh", Antoinette tried again, struggling to remember what little Italian she picked up on her honeymoon long ago. "What's your name?"

The girl still stared at her miserably for a moment until she finally lost her patience. She burst into a torrent of words quickly and loudly, gesticulating in annoyed desperation. Antoinette only understood two things: first, it was a language she had never heard before; and second, that language had far too many consonants for her taste.

"Alright, alright, calm down", she said in French again, holding her hands up and patting the girl on her arm. "Slow down. We'll think of something." The girl again didn't understand a word, but she understood her tone and she calmed down, wiping her tears and waiting for Antoinette to do something.

Antoinette knew some people who spoke several languages - the closest of those would be the receptionist at her workplace. She was on her way to work anyway; the Opera was just around the corner and Antoinette tried to think of a good way to lead the girl there without panicking her any further. She stood up, pointing at the corner.

"We need to go there", she said, looking at the girl and taking her hand. The girl let her, looking into her eyes intently. "They'll help us." The girl nodded, following her obediently into the Opera.

"Jean, I need your help", Antoinette called as she walked in with the girl. Jean raised his eyebrows, but simply nodded at her. Antoinette was a fairly young woman, but something about her made people not question what she told them to do.

"Yes, madame Giry?"

"This girl is lost, but she doesn't speak French. I need you to try and figure out how we can talk to her and find her parents", she said, pointing at the girl who looked at Jean curiously. Jean blinked and looked back at her, and the girl waved, smiling.

"Uh, alright", he said. "She looks Italian to me."

"She's not", Antoinette puffed. "I tried."

"Spanish, maybe?" Jean looked at the girl and asked in Spanish, "¿Dónde están tus padres?"

The girl looked at him like he was a complete idiot.

"Not", Jean puffed. "I don't know all the languages, Madame. What do you want me to do?"

"Just try the ones you do", Antoinette asked.

"Uh", Jean tried again. "Sprichst du Deutsch?"

"Ein bisschen", the girl replied without missing a beat.

"Uh-huh", Antoinette mumbled. "I would not have thought to try that in a million years."

"Wie heißt du?" Jean asked.

"Ich bin Alina", the girl replied politely. "Alina Boričević. Schön Sie Zu Treffen. Können Sie bitte mir helfen, meine Eltern zu finden?"

"Her name is Alina something", Jean told Antoinette. "She's asking if we can help her find her parents. Very politely, I might add."

"Yes, that's why I brought her here", Antoinette said. Jean repeated that to the girl, and she nodded.

"Ask her where she saw them last", Antoinette said. Jean repeated that to the girl, and she sighed in obvious annoyance.

"Ich weiß es nicht. Hier sieht alles gleich us."

"She said she doesn't know. Everything looks the same here", Jean said.

"Ask her where she's from, then", Antoinette asked, and Jean repeated it to the girl obediently.

"Zagreb", she beamed up. "Aus Kroatien, in der Österreichisch-Ungarischen Monarchie."

"One of those backyard provinces in the Austrian Empire", Jean said. "That explains it, I suppose."

"And why is she here?"

After a few more minutes of strained communication, Jean managed to get from the girl the information Antoinette needed: she was here on vacation with her parents, they started fighting and she got sick of them so she wandered a few feet away from them, but then got completely lost in the crowd until Antoinette found her.

"Sie werden mich töten! Vielleicht ließen sie Ohne mich!" the girl exclaimed, growing panicked again. Jean repeated to Antoinette, "She says they'll kill her. Also, she's worried they might have left without her."

"They will do no such thing. There is no need to panic", she told the girl, and Jean translated it. "Jean, give me a pencil and some paper, can you?" he took the pencil and paper from his desk and passed them to Antoinette, who sat the girl on a nearby bench and offered them to her. The girl held the pencil and paper in her hand, and something about it seemed a little off to Antoinette, but she ignored it for now.

"Jean, tell her to draw the hotel she's staying at and the writing on the front. She can draw and write, right?"

Jean asked the girl, and she grimaced something in annoyance, but nodded nevertheless and started drawing, leaning her paper on the bench. Her hand was incredibly clumsy as she drew and even clumsier as she wrote the name of the hotel down, and when she showed it to Antoinette, she couldn't discern a single letter.

"I can't read this", she said to Jean. "Is it in French even?"

Jean repeated it to the girl, who nodded and threw her hands up angrily, forgetting she was still holding the pencil in her right hand. As she threw her hand up, the pencil flew over into the air and the girl panicked and reached out, catching the pencil mid-air with a quick, nimble movement of her left hand. She looked at them with slight embarrassment as if she was expecting to be scolded, and mumbled something close to an apology.

"Ask her to try again", Antoinette told Jean. He translated it for the girl, and she sighed, taking the pencil back into her right hand and turning to the paper.

In a moment of inspiration, Antoinette plucked the pencil from the girl's right hand and placed it on her left. The girl looked at her curiously, but the pencil sat much less clumsily in her left hand, and she nodded.

"Try again", Antoinette said. The girl nodded one more time and started again, working much more quickly than before. When she was finished, Antoinette saw that the drawing was quite decent for the girl's age - and the writing of the hotel's name and address on the bottom was, in fact, completely discernible.

"Hah! Very good", she smiled widely at the girl. Alina, smart enough to understand compliments in every language, grinned excitedly back at her.

"Let's go, then", Antoinette stood up, taking the girl by the hand and nodding to Jean.

"Thank you, Jean", she said. "Tell the girls I'll be a little late, there's an emergency. I won't take long."

"Yes, Madame", he replied mischievously, leading them politely out the door.

The girl rambled on in German the whole way to the hotel, relieved now that she had someone to help her; Antoinette was amazed by how much the girl could disregard the fact she couldn't understand her. After a while, she realized she was fairly interested in what the girl had to say, so she tried again in the language she sort of spoke that she thought was closest to German she could get.

"You are Alina?" she asked in English.

Alina nodded at her. She did know a few words of English - her parents tried to prepare her for studying abroad from a young age, and of all the languages they tried to teach her, English had only recently occurred to them - but to her, it seemed the easiest. She progressed much more quickly than she did with German, even though she started German when she was barely five.

"I am Antoinette Giry", Antoinette said.

"Teta Giry", Alina smiled at her.

"Close enough", Antoinette winked. "What did you say before?"

"I saw nine cats on this street", Alina pointed. "Are they someone's?"

"I don't know", Antoinette laughed.

"Can I take them home?"

"You should ask your parents", she replied, not eager to upset someone's domestic peace.

"They'll say no. That's why I asked you", Alina grinned at her.

Antoinette burst into surprised laughter before she could stop herself, as Alina took out a cookie from her pocket and threw it in front of the nearest cat who looked at it with utter disdain.

Chapter 22:Getting Used To It

Winter of 1882, Paris

The boy spent the first month avoiding Antoinette as much as possible. He didn't seem to avoid her so much as desperately tried to find a way to be alone. She spent every free moment she had with him, trying to get him to talk, trying to get to know him, trying to make him eat more than once a day, and so on. He obeyed whatever she told him without a word, but refused to answer any questions. After she spent more than an hour at a time around him, he seemed to space out completely and stop listening to her, only coming back to his senses from time to time if she made a sudden noise or movement.

After a while, Antoinette gave up. The boy was incredibly hard to be around, to be honest. He never displayed any kind of emotion aside from fear, never talked, and rarely responded to the outside world and Antoinette was, quite understandably, at her wits' end already. She came to see him in his room as soon as Meg was asleep every day - weirdly convenient, he seemed to be naturally leaning toward being awake later in the evening and sleeping through most of the day - but after saying a few words and asking a few questions, she would simply go about her business, cooking or cleaning, whatever she needed to do for the day. She went to work and when she came back she'd visit him again, talking some more and letting him be when he didn't answer.

After a week of that, the boy was still silent. However, he seemed to listen to her words more attentively, and Antoinette wasn't sure if he was growing bored of being alone or if he was simply getting used to her.

In any case, one day as she left his room and went into the kitchen, she turned around thinking of what she had to do only to notice him standing in

the doorway.

"Oh, I didn't hear you", she let out a surprised laugh, and he tensed slightly.

"Do you need anything?" she asked gently. The boy shook his head. He was starting to feel stupid, considering if he should maybe go back to his room and stop bothering her.

Antoinette smiled slightly, realizing what was going on. "Would you like to sit down?"

The boy didn't answer, he just kept staring at her with piercing yellow eyes beneath the mask. It was hard to tell what he was thinking at any given moment, and the mask didn't help. Neither did the silence. Neither did the staring, to be honest - for someone who grew agitated whenever she looked at him for too long, he certainly didn't have a problem with staring at others (aside from whenever she tried to talk to him, in which cases he suddenly looked everywhere else). She would have to talk to him about it someday.

Antoinette pulled out the chair closest to the door and turned around to start cutting vegetables for tomorrow's lunch. When she looked again, the boy was sitting on the chair, looking at the knife in her hand with slight unease.

"Would you like some tea?" she asked, smiling at him. He shook his head, still staring at the knife. Antoinette saw the fear in his eyes and wondered what to do. It wouldn't be very practical to just dump whole onions into the stew so she wouldn't upset him, but she wanted to find some way to make him less tense.

"I'm making some stew for tomorrow. Would you help me?" she asked.

Much to her surprise, the boy nodded for the first time that week.

"Alright, then", she looked around. She'd have to be smart about this. The boy's arms and hands still lacked the strength and precision that a normal person would have - one month with her would not make up for years of malnutrition and abuse, and so his limbs were still weak and shaky. Cutting things was not a very good idea.

"Here. Clean these peas", she said, handing him a paper bag full of green beans and a bowl.

The boy looked at the bowl, then at her.

"Like this", she split the bean open, pushing the peas out with her finger and dropping them into the bowl.

The boy reached out and grabbed another bean, repeating what she did.

"Alright, you got it", she smiled. He fumbled a little bit, then got to work; he always responded very strangely after she smiled or praised him. Antoinette turned around and kept working, humming something to herself. As she worked, she relaxed and forgot about him, lost in thought, until she heard a loud crash behind her.

Antoinette turned around to find the boy staring at her with alarm, having stood up to hand her the bowl, and the aforementioned bowl was broken on the floor with peas scattered everywhere.

The boy blinked once, asking himself if this was really how his entire life was going to go. It was such a simple task, mind-numbingly simple, and he managed to mess it up after it was already done. He didn't expect the woman to understand that his hands were too shaky to hold a porcelain bowl full of peas, and readied himself for the blow.

Antoinette looked at the boy, as visible panic passed through his eyes for a moment before they closed. He started slowly stepping back and covered his ears with his hands.

"Uh", she started, unsure what in the world was going on. "Are you alright? Did you cut yourself?"

The boy walked back until his back met the wall and stood there, eyes and ears closed, waiting. It was better to get it over with as quickly as possible.

Antoinette stared at the boy in confusion, unsure what to do. He was expecting her to do something terrible to him now - for breaking a bowl?

What kind of insanity has this kid been through? - and she felt a sudden surge of some protective motherly instinct. Her first impulse was to go to him, pat him and reassure him that nothing bad would happen to him. But seeing as how horrified he seemed with his eyes tightly shut and his ears covered, he might not react too well to that.

Trying to think of something to do, Antoinette slowly kneeled and started picking up broken pieces of the bowl. It was unsalvageable, unfortunately. As for the peas, the floor wasn't dirty, so after she picks them up, and washes and cooks them, they should be fine.

Wondering why this was taking so long, the boy slowly peeked through one of his eyes. He saw Antoinette on the floor, picking up bits of porcelain with absolutely no anger in her movements as she did it, and taken aback by surprise he opened his eyes and lowered his hands.

Antoinette saw the movement from the corner of her eye and turned her head to him.

"It's alright, honey. It was an accident. Come here and help me pick it up", she said mildly.

That could be a trick, he thought. It made no sense for her to be so alright with that. The boy stood still, looking at her.

"Alright, then, you can also stay there", she mumbled. She wondered if any of her efforts will ever work on this boy, of it he would keep silently refusing all of her attempts to treat him like a human being. The whole situation had been grating on her nerves for the past month; she constantly lived in fear that she was doing something wrong to him, constantly doubted herself, constantly wondered if any of this was even… why was she doing all this? Was she trying to help him, was she so sure she could, or was it her hubris that made her think she could right all of the world's wrongs by herself? This entire situation left her with a lot less energy for her work and even her daughter, and for what?

A single tear rolled out of Antoinette's eye as she stood up with the porcelain shards in her hands and threw them into the trash. She didn't

notice it - Antoinette rarely cried, never in front of others; and lost in thought she forgot to keep up her tightly-wound composure. To be fair, she normally never doubted herself either.

Like something suddenly possessed him, the boy jolted from his place and hurried to her, stopping one step from her. He had no idea how to correct this; her tears were so much more terrifying than any punishment he could have imagined, even if he had no idea why. If he could have broken his damn himself instead of the bowl he would have done it; unfortunately, that would not fix the stupid thing and he could not think of a single thing that would fix it. He stood in front of Antoinette, so agitated that he nearly jumped out of his skin, pulling on the hair of his temples and nervously pacing about. He needed to express something he had no words for.

"Are you trying to tell me something?" Antoinette asked slowly.

The boy nodded, his eyes darting with panic again. He pointed at Antoinette's cheek, then opened his mouth, closed it again, and shook his head. Antoinette brought her hand to her cheek, wiped off the tear in surprise, and looked at him.

"I was… crying? You're telling me not to cry?"

The boy nodded, then shrugged. Something like that, he supposed.

"It's upsetting you that I'm crying?" she asked, suddenly forgetting all of her doubts from before.

He nodded.

"Is it because you think it's your fault?" she asked.

The boy thought about it. The most obvious answer was yes because he thought it was his fault; but he was fairly certain he would have been upset even if it wasn't his fault, for reasons he didn't understand.

She didn't need to know that. A simple answer would suffice. He nodded again.

"It's not your fault", she said, looking into his eyes. "It was an accident. It wasn't on purpose. Do you understand that?"

Yes, he did understand that but wasn't counting on her understanding it. It always seemed to him nobody else understood the difference between an accident and a deliberate one if he happened to anger them. This was refreshing.

He nodded again.

"I'm not crying about the stupid bowl anyway, to be honest", she shrugged. "I'm sad because I think you might be miserable here, and I don't know what to do. I only wanted to help you. I don't know what I'm doing wrong. You have to tell me", she said.

He looked at her in confusion. Yes, he was miserable here, but what difference did it make where he was miserable? This was by far the most peaceful place he was ever miserable in; he had no desire to leave.

That was kind of hard to communicate with nods, he realized and shrugged.

After a second, he suddenly realized she might think it was her that was making him miserable, and that thought was too unbearable to be left with just a shrug.

"It's not your fault", he whispered.

Antoinette gaped. If she was still holding the pieces, she would have dropped them.

"What?" She managed.

He looked at her in annoyance. Did she want him to repeat it? Why? What could he have possibly done wrong now? Was it necessary for her to stare at him like that? He took a slow step backward.

"Y… you can speak", she said, coming to her senses. She looked around for a moment, breaking eye contact.

He sighed. Was that going to be a problem?

"I'm… I'm so glad", she let out a single relieved laugh and beamed a smile at him so wide that he thought the room suddenly started shining.

He nodded.

"Well. Could you say something else?" She asked.

He narrowed his eyes at her. Was this about something specific, or was she just curious to see how many words the beast knew?

"Your name. Can you tell me your name?" She asked carefully.

He thought about it. There was a good reason why he didn't want to do it, but he couldn't remember it right now, with her smiling at him so kindly.

"Erik", he said quietly. It sounded so strange, saying it for the first time after nearly a decade. It didn't feel real.

"Erik. That's lovely", she said, bringing her fingers up to her still-smiling lips.

Well, now it did sound a lot nicer than before.

"Well, Erik, can you tell me", she gestured around, "- is there anything I can do to make this house more comfortable for you?"

He shrugged. He didn't know if there was anything, and if there was if he could even ask for it. Frankly, he never expected any of this to happen. When she came to him that night, his only hope was that someone merciful enough had finally arrived to kill him; living after that point was something he was entirely unprepared for and only now getting used to.

"Alright, but if you think of anything, tell me", she said. "let's pick up these peas and finish making the stew, shall we?"

Erik obediently moved across the room, kneeled, and started gathering the peas in his hands, putting them in another bowl Antoinette placed next to

him. It didn't escape him how strange it was that she didn't find his hands too unclean to touch her food. He, personally, still thought he could see the filth under his skin even after rubbing his entire body raw in the bath every day.

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After that day, Erik switched from avoiding Antoinette to silently following her wherever she went, and as she asked him to help with various chores, he silently did whatever she told him to. Distracted by the easy tasks she gave him, he occasionally even found himself answering her questions.

"How old are you?" She asked him one day as she taught him how to tie various knots and braids - some of them she used on her ballet costumes, and some were taught to her by her late husband and his military friends. She had no idea why she was teaching him that, but he seemed to like doing things with his hands - and they slowly became more nimble than before, even as his strength progressed very slowly.

"I don't know", he admitted as he struggled with the piece of string. He felt stupid trying to knot it. He understood from the first time she showed him how he should do it, it was just his goddamn hands that wouldn't work at all and it was incredibly frustrating. I can do all these things in my head, please believe me. He wished he could say that, but he found it even harder to say the things he wanted to say. Answering direct questions was one thing, but speaking of his own accord was entirely different and tremendously hard. As soon as he said a few words, he'd get so afraid he couldn't go on and so he'd leave the sentence unfinished, however weird it sounded, and withdrew into himself. He might as well have had a brick wall sealing his mouth.

He would not have bothered with any of this nonsense if she wasn't smiling so nicely at him all the time, praising him whenever he did or answered something she asked.

"What do you mean?" Antoinette asked, turning to him. "How long were you in that cage?"

That was not something he wanted to think about. He put his hands down and looked at her.

"Alright, you don't have to answer", she said. Something in his eyes made her afraid to ask any further, and she looked away.

"I think I'm sixteen", he offered.

"Oh. I thought you were younger", she blurted out.

"Why?" he asked suspiciously.

Because you act like a particularly shy eight-year-old, she wanted to say but stopped herself in time. "I… don't know. I'm not good at guessing people's age, I suppose."

"I'm not people", he replied matter-of-factly.

"Huh?" she blinked. "What are you, then?"

"I don't know", he replied. He'd never seen anything like him at all and had no name for what he was. Others did have many names for it, but he kept stupidly hoping there would be some other name, some that people wouldn't hiss and spit at him.

"Who said that?" Antoinette asked sharply, accidentally slipping into the tone she used when she worked. It wasn't a particularly angry tone, just strict and commanding, but he still winced and turned to look at her. "No, actually, it doesn't matter. What does matter is that its nonsense? You're a person. A boy. You're Erik. Nothing else."

Now, Erik was a name his mother did hiss at him quite a lot back then, which was why he was so reluctant to give it to Antoinette. And she, either unrealistically stupid or unrealistically kind, didn't seem to notice the disgusting things about him and never yelled or hissed at him - and so, spoken in her voice the name became something else.

If she did think he was a person, a boy - that was impossible, nonsensical, completely unbelievable - that meant that not only did she not notice the

goddamn horror on his head or, for that matter, all over his body, but in these weeks they've spent together she didn't notice the rot growing all over his insides. She didn't know about the black roots and vines that had taken hold in every corner of his mind. Maybe she had no way of knowing unless he told her, but something inside him felt that it was really obvious.

It would be unbearable to watch once she realized the truth.

Overwhelmed by that thought, he suddenly felt the need to hide. He stood up soundlessly and left the room, then opened the large closet in the hallway and locked himself inside.

A few hours later, he was distraught from his racing thoughts by a light knock on the closet door. He felt as if someone pulled him straight from hell - an endless circle of repeating the screaming and hissing of terrible things in his head - and slammed him back onto Earth.

"Erik, can you unlock the door?" he heard a quiet, pleading voice from outside.

Antoinette waited a few more seconds, then added, "I made you some cookies. Whatever I said that upset you, I'm sorry. We don't have to talk about it. Just come outside."

He slowly brought himself to his feet, needles pricking down his legs, and unlocked the door. He peeked through it a little to see if she was angry.

She didn't seem to be.

"It's not your fault", he said quietly through the tiny gap.

"Ah", Antoinette sighed. "I can understand that, but I can't understand what it is that upsets you sometimes. And I'd like to understand, eventually, even if you don't want to tell me today."

"Why?" he asked.

"So I can make you happier", she offered.

"Why?" and how on Earth would that even be possible?

"Because I want to see you happy?" she was growing confused.

"Why?" he asked again.

"Uh", she wasn't too sure about the answer to that. It wasn't something she often consciously thought about; why for God's sake would she need a reason to want to make somebody happy? She had spent her entire life fixing things that were broken and handling everything and everybody - it was what made her progress to the head of the ballet corpus so quickly; it was second nature to her and nobody until now, to be honest, really dared to ask her why she felt the need to right every single wrong around her and straighten every tilted painting.

"I care about you", she finally managed, after thinking for a bit.

"Why?" he pleaded.

"I don't know", she said truthfully. "I saw you chained in a cage, and I brought you home, and now you're my boy. I didn't think about it. I just feel that way."

"I'm not a boy", he whispered. "I am a disease."

"Don't say that about yourself", she snapped again into that commanding tone she used when she was working. He shut up and withdrew further back into the closet, looking at her warily.

"I don't care how many things you can tell me that is wrong with you", she continued, "I already made you cookies, and you can't change my mind."

"Many", his voice cracked. "Many things." his vision was getting strangely blurry.

"I don't care", she repeated. "I've decided."

That didn't make it any easier. Erik crumpled back onto the closet floor as his limbs gave out, suddenly realizing he was crying. He desperately tried

to stop it, but the more he tried, the more sobs shook his shoulders, and more tears wet the cheeks of his mask. He buried his head in his hands, wishing he could just disappear.

Antoinette had not dared to touch him or get too close to him ever since he arrived aside from changing the bandages on his wrists, worried that it would scare him off; but this was too much even for her. She slowly opened the closet door and stood in front of the figure crying on the floor. Kneeling on the floor, she reached out with one hand to pat his shoulder.

He shot back immediately trying to withdraw but had nowhere to go in the cramped space.

Antoinette persisted, scooting over to sit next to him and spreading her arms wide. He didn't seem to understand what she meant by it, so she slowly took his arm again and nudged him towards her. He was terrified but didn't protest, and before he knew it he was crying with his head leaning on her shoulder and her arms gently embracing him.

That also didn't make it any easier to stop, as much as he tried. The feel of her warm arms around his body, after the initial urge to claw at his skin, quieted down the screaming and the black spots in his vision. But as the rot recoiled back into some corner of his mind unknown even to him, it gave way to so much sorrow at once he thought he might burst. It was a different kind of sorrow, a hot, searing, living flash in his stomach instead of the constant heavy rock over his heart and numbing thud in his head he felt for the past decade. And so stopping was impossible.

"It's alright, dear", she said, stroking his back. "Just cry. We're not in a hurry."

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After that, Erik spent a few days in his room in embarrassed silence, but once he came out Antoinette noticed a significant change in his behavior. For one, he was much more likely to speak out of his own accord and not just in response to direct questions. Secondly, he kept not only following her around the house but also waiting in anticipation of her coming back

from work. He always looked relieved every time she arrived home with her daughter (whom she took care to always leave with a friend or someone at the opera who could take care of her, so he could have a few hours of privacy) as if he was afraid she'd suddenly disappear and leave him alone in the house. As soon as Meg was out of sight, he'd come to seek her out and kept following her until she went to bed.

"What do you normally do when you're alone?" she asked him after a few days of that.

He shrugged. Panic, usually.

"You can make yourself comfortable here", she waved around. "If you're hungry, make yourself a meal, you don't have to wait for me. If you're bored, feel free to find anything to occupy yourself with. You can take my books. Can you read?" she asked carefully.

"Yes", he said. "I read some of your books." He wasn't sure if he should admit it earlier from fear that she'd get angry at him for touching her bookshelves, but now that she offered it, he felt compelled to prove himself to her. There weren't many other things he could do, after all.

"Oh, very good", she said, slightly impressed. "And write?"

"I know how", he sighed. "Not sure if I can. My hands don't listen."

"Ah, yes", she frowned. "Are they improving at least?"

"A little", he admitted. "But too slow."

"As long as you practice, they'll improve", she assured him. "It'll be fine. Two months ago you could barely button your shirt, and here you are."

Here wasn't particularly far, Erik thought in frustration. Yes, he could button things now, and he could tie some knots and do simple tasks, but it was still on the level of a child. He spent hours every day practicing when he was alone; he could not stand the thought that he might be trapped in this weak

body and these clumsy hands now that he had a chance to live. He would have to make them goddamn work, or he would die trying.

"I know it seems impossible now", she continued. "But trust me. I'm a dancer, I told you that. I remember being young and looking at adult ballerinas thinking I could never, ever do these things they do. And here I am. It's all a matter of time and persistence", she said. "We're having a performance soon, my students are dancing, and I wish you could see it. I think you'd like it. Some of these girls were terrible when they first arrived, and now they're performing on stage", she added proudly.

"Hm", he said.

Antoinette suddenly had an idea. "Would you like me to take you? To see it?"

He looked at her in alarm. "Where?"

"To the Opera, where I work."

He shook his head, panicking visibly. "No, no, no. No."

"Would you rather be cooped up in this room all your life?" she raised her eyebrows.

"Yes." well, unless she wanted to kick him out, but he wasn't going to be the one to bring that possibility up.

"Understandable", she admitted. "But I could sneak you in unnoticed. Nobody will harm you as long as you're with me", she said, and realized at that moment it was true; she would fight tooth and claw if somebody threatened him. Her icy gray eyes had a look he hadn't seen before, and he realized he sort of believed her. She was terrifying.

"Hm", he said. It wasn't a yes, but it wasn't a no either, and Antoinette noticed it.

"Alright, well, that might be too much for a start", she said. "In any case, I don't like that you're constantly trapped here. We should go out and take a

walk sometime", she offered.

"A walk?"

"Just to the end of the street and back." she thought some more. "I can give you a scarf and cloak so you can bundle up. Would that make it easier?"

"Uh." a little easier, yes, but still horrifying. "But after dark."

"Certainly. But don't you miss sunlight?"

To miss the sunlight, he would first need a chance to get accustomed to it, which he never had until now. Seeing it through his window was weird enough already. "No."

"Alright then, that's what we'll do", she smiled. Even as she was smiling at him warmly, he had a feeling it was not exactly up to debate whether he would do it or not.

And so, three days later, after some talking and coercing and bribing, Antoinette gave Erik a thick scarf and cloak and waited. He pulled it on remarkably slowly, wrapping the scarf around his entire head, then taking it off to secure the mask again, then wrapped it around his head one more time.

"Whose scarf is this?" he asked. Antoinette was willing to bet her right hand he didn't give a damn about the scarf or who it belonged to and was only trying to stall her, but she answered anyway.

"It was my husband's. Most of the clothes I gave you were his." Which was not ideal - her late husband was fairly muscular, broad-shouldered, and a little shorter than Erik, so the clothes required a lot of alteration, and they still hung from his shoulders slightly. It was impossible to account for his thinness- even as he would slowly start filling out to a semi-normal weight.

He stopped. "You're married?" of course, she had a kid. But how come he never saw anyone else at the house? Would the man kick him out when he came back?

"I was. He died", she said matter-of-factly. "A few years ago."

"Oh." he didn't know what to say.

"It's fine", she said. Her tone seemed to Erik uncharacteristically flat and emotionless.

"Why did you give me his clothes?"

"He certainly has no more use for them", she replied, a bit annoyed. "And you had nothing. He always helped people who had nothing."

Erik looked at the clothes on his body, then at her again.

"Do you think his ghost is still in them?" he blurted out before realizing he said it out loud. It was not a normal thing to say, he knew that.

"Ghosts don't exist", she said, blinking at him in surprise. "Don't worry."

"Uh." he thought about it. "I'm not worried. He doesn't sound mean. If his ghost is still in them, I'll take care of him for you." he nodded at her. He had no idea what else to say; he had never been in a conversation like this, but he desperately wanted to say something to make her feel better.

Antoinette didn't expect that at all. She swallowed back and replied politely,

"Thank you, dear. I'm sure you will."

It took him about an hour of delay to finally exit the house.

"I forgot something", he announced as he stepped over the threshold for the twentieth time.

Antoinette silently took a piece of string out of her pocket and handed it to him. Ever since she taught him how to tie knots and braids, he often carried a piece of string with him that he played with whenever he was anxious or upset. It calmed him down remarkably well to do something with his hands, and Antoinette planned it as she thought about their little adventure.

Erik silently took the string - he had one already in his pocket, but he wasn't about to admit his bluff - and stepped outside, pulling the hood of his cloak over his already masked, scarf-wrapped face.

As they exited the house into the dark moonlit street, Antoinette noticed he started trembling slightly and decided to strike a conversation to get his mind off of things. She noticed him tying and untying the same knot with his hands as he walked.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" she asked.

"Uh", he said. He really shouldn't tell her, he told himself. It would be a bad idea to tell her. A horrible idea. She already knew he was disfigured, strange, and barely functional; would it help if she also knew he was insane? Not. He had no business telling her, it would be incredibly stupid, and why would she even care to hear something nasty like that anyway -

"I don't know what else they are", he said.

"They?" she asked. "Who?"

"The, uh", he fumbled. "Nothing."

"It's alright, sweetie", she said and kept walking. She kept silent for a few more minutes until he finally burst.

"You can't see them", he rambled, "but I can. I can hear them too. I don't think they're real. Maybe they're ghosts, maybe some apparitions. I think I might be mad."

"Uh", she shook her head, unsure what to say. "Are there any here now?"

"Not visible. But I can hear them."

"What are they saying?"

He kept silent for a moment before replying quietly, "I don't want to repeat it."

"Ah. I'm sorry", she said. "You don't have to."

"It's not important", he said. "They mostly annoy me. They never have anything useful to say."

"Is that why you're sometimes upset out of nowhere?" she asked carefully.

He kept silent for another moment. "Sometimes. Sometimes it's other reasons. But yes. They get too loud and I just want to be in peace, but I can't. And I can't hear anything else."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" she asked.

"I don't know." he did know. She could, for example, hug him like she did that day in the closet, and hold him and talk to him quietly until they shut up. But he would rather die than ask that of her. He might die if he asked and she refused.

He suddenly realized they had reached the end of the street.

"We did it", she announced. "Great job, sweetie."

"Can we go back now?"

"Yes, yes." she turned around and started walking back, Erik following behind her.

"My husband's name was Lucien", she remarked. "On the off chance that you do see his ghost, tell him - I don't know, I'll think of something, I suppose."

"Lucien", he repeated. "I'll thank him for the clothes."

"Alright", she laughed.

ooo

It took a few more walks until Erik was ready to not only exit the house with her but enter another building. The whole thing had to be carefully

planned so that he could have enough time to prepare and enough space not to panic in the presence of other people. Luckily, Opera Populaire had such a strange design that Antoinette sometimes felt as if it was made specifically to hide people in the shadows; with numerous corridors and dark spots, it would give Erik enough options to hide somewhere and watch the performance in peace.

"I still don't understand why I'm doing this", he admitted earlier that day.

"Because it will be good for you", she said sternly. "You can't be cooped up in this room all the time. You're a smart boy, and I see you're growing bored here", she nodded at him. "And you deserve to see something of the world, even if this is all I can manage to show you right now."

Antoinette did her usual pre-performance routine of dropping Meg off at a babysitter, packing everything she'd need for at least 12 hours, and - remembering Erik would need food and water for all that time she packed that as well, while he paced around nervously.

"Calm down, honey", she said. "We'll be there hours early. Nobody will see you."

As Erik put on several layers of clothing, along with the usual mask-scarf-cloak ensemble, she locked the door and led him through the street quickly. They entered through a back entrance, one of the ones used by staff - and the least used one, too. Erik refused to enter and waited around the corner until she checked it was indeed empty on both sides and called him. He entered quickly and stood next to her, his eyes darting nervously around the room.

"Alright", she said. "So, you'll have to wait until we're done rehearsing before the play."

He nodded, still looking around.

"I have something to show you", she said, leading him on. She opened a small, unassuming door he noticed before but didn't think much of it.

"This place has a lot of built-in corridors", she showed him inside. "They all eventually lead to the cellars, but you don't have to go through them to pass. They were built so that the staff could move more easily through the building without upsetting the guests. Let me show you." she led him through the corridor, feeling her way around until they reached a certain point.

"We're close to the stage now", she said, opening a tiny peephole in another small door. "See?"

"Yes", he said. He could see both the auditorium and the stage, though not too well - they were rather high up.

"This was built so that the staff could, in the event of some immediate danger, react quickly", she said. "There are several of these all across the auditorium, but this one is rarely used. It's too high up to be practical. There are no tickets sold at this part of the balcony for this performance, so there will be nobody here."

"Are you sure?" he asked warily.

"Yes", she replied sternly. "I wouldn't put you in danger. You can trust me."

He decided to keep quiet.

"In any case, you can wander around here if you want", she said. "It's a long time until the performance. Look here", she went another way and led him through another narrow corridor.

"This is the library", she announced. "Right past this door. You can find something to read here, nobody will be here today."

"Alright", he nodded. She led him into the large, dimly-lit room. It contained more books than he had ever seen in his life - an entire maze of bookshelves stretching from floor to ceiling, along with decorative statues and paintings. It looked… well, he felt excitement in his heart from the prospect of finally getting to read something new - but it also looked strangely peaceful. Erik had never been in a library in his life, and wasn't

aware of how quiet they were; it seemed to him like the absolute best room in the whole world.

"I have to go now. We'll be rehearsing the ballet parts first, and you can come to watch if you want. If not, you're welcome to stay here until eight", Antoinette explained. "I think you'll enjoy this opera. I hope so", she blushed slightly. "We all worked hard on it."

Erik nodded, looking around the giant library - to be fair, it wasn't as objectively giant as it seemed to him. "I like it here."

"You'll like it even more when you see the opera", she chuckled. "Don't get distracted by reading too long. You'll miss it."

ooo

After the performance ended, Antoinette looked for Erik in the library, the corridors, and the empty spaces around the auditorium, saying goodbye and dismissing people who wanted to congratulate her and make small talk - she had a mission, and she had no time for pleasantries. She couldn't find him anywhere, so she simply stood around, making just enough conversation not to be suspicious, looking around all the time trying to spot a figure in the shadows.

After everyone left, she snuck back inside - she had her key for the back entrance - and called for him openly.

"Erik!" she called in the empty hallway.

Nobody answered.

Antoinette searched the corridors again but had no luck. Finally, even though she knew it was a small chance he'd go so close to the stage, she entered the tiny space under the orchestra pit.

"Erik!" she repeated, feeling panic welling up in her throat.

After a few seconds, a shape materialized next to her from the shadows.

"Where have you been?" she asked angrily. "You worried me! Why didn't you respond when I called you?"

"You called me?" he asked, his eyes strangely glassy and unfocused.

"Called you? I've been looking for you for hours! I searched half the floor looking for you!" she crossed her arms, looking at him sternly.

"I didn't hear you", he said, looking at some indistinct point in front of him. "I was thinking."

Antoinette blinked, worrying for a second he might be spiraling into one of those strange moods - but he didn't seem upset at all.

"Darling, what's wrong?" she asked, softening her tone.

"Nothing", he whispered. "Everything is right."

Antoinette stared at him for a second - he didn't seem to notice it at all. "Sweetie, you're acting strange."

"Am I?" he said, shaking his head. "I don't feel strange. I feel… wide awake, but in a dream."

Wondering which part of that was not strange for his standards, Antoinette still decided to go for the optimistic approach. "Is it because of the opera, dear? You enjoyed it?"

"The opera", he whispered. "I have never… I didn't know something like this existed."

"Something like what?"

"Something like this kind of music", he breathed. "I have… I had… when I was little I played a little bit of piano, but it wasn't… it was nothing like this, never like this, not even close." he took a deep breath. "This is the most beautiful thing I have ever experienced. Thank you, Antoinette."

"You're welcome", she said slowly. It was the most she had ever heard him speak, and the first time he openly thanked her for something, but she didn't want to comment on it. "I'll take you here again if you want."

"I want to stay here", he looked directly into her eyes. It was also the first time he expressed wanting something so openly; he usually only said it when he didn't want something. Antoinette could only look at him in awe; he seemed like a completely different person - as if all of his repressed humanity came back upon hearing the music. He was no longer the insecure, silent ghostly apparition - he stood up straight and spoke without hesitation, even though he was still dreamy and distracted - and Antoinette understood at that moment what he meant by wide awake, but in a dream.

"You can't exactly stay here, dear", she started patiently. "But we can come back again if you want."

"But why not?" he pleaded. "I've been around. This place is enormous. Did you know it has five floors underground? They're massive. Nobody ever goes there, it's empty."

"Yes, I know", she frowned. "Did you go down there by yourself? How did you get - "

"There's so much space here", he pressed. "Nobody would ever know I'm here, and I wouldn't bother you in your apartment, and - and- you'd come to visit me, right?" he finished, the hesitation in his voice coming back.

"I'll never abandon you, dear", Antoinette said, looking at him in thought. He was right about one thing - he wasn't exactly bothering her in her apartment, but she was still wary about introducing him to Meg. Another inconvenient thing had started happening - as Erik grew more comfortable around Antoinette, he started sleeping more - and inevitably, he started dreaming. It was only a matter of time before neighbors figured out whose apartment the occasional screaming was coming from and started asking uncomfortable questions. Antoinette didn't want to think about what her well-adjusted, God-fearing neighbors would do upon finding out about her current living arrangement. She avoided mentioning it to Erik - it was

hardly his fault, after all - but it had started worrying her enough that she was considering if they could all move.

This would potentially solve that problem, but she would never leave him somewhere she wasn't certain he would have decent living conditions and safety.

"Are you serious about this?" she asked.

"Yes!" his eyes widened. "I want to stay here! There's enough place for me here, and I wouldn't bother anybody!"

"Where exactly do you want to live?"

"Uh", he started. "I… haven't decided yet, but I think it's best if I'm underground. Nobody will be able to find me."

"It's dangerous down there", she cut him off. "And dark, and cold, and probably moldy."

"No, no, it's not", he interrupted. "Not dangerous. It's dark, but I can see well enough. Cold doesn't bother me that much. I can fix it, actually", he fumbled. "Once I get stronger. I can clean up one part of the cellars, and it would be fine."

Antoinette thought about it. It was a wild, preposterous idea, yes - why was she even considering it? She cast a glance his way and immediately remembered why. In her long years of experience with young people, she had learned how to keep them in check and have them listen to her. Her authority was never in question, but every once in a while, every kid had that one wish they would fight tooth and nail for, that one thing they wanted so frantically and desperately they'd do everything it took and bother everyone around them until they got it - and looking into Erik's eyes, she knew that this was it. It was crucial how she responded to this situation; crucial both for him and for his relationship with her.

"I'll consider it", she said.

Chapter 23:Floating

June 1895, Le Havre

It was a bland little boat - out of the ones she could afford, Amelija chose the one that seemed sturdiest and least likely to sink to the bottom of the sea. Granted, it was ugly, plain, and didn't have anything remotely fun, but so what? So what if there wouldn't be champagne and oysters on the trip? Amelija could live four weeks without champagne, or so she told herself. Luckily, she at least had some chocolate packed in her suitcase.
She turned back to look at her companions. "This seems alright, doesn't it?"
Antoinette nodded. "Wise decision. It's a safe ship."
"My funds are not that tight, but they're still limited," Amelija said, feeling the slightest hint of embarrassment.
"Don't worry", Antoinette smiled at her. "Where you're going, it's unlikely your hosts would judge you for that. I don't think they're rolling in money either, but I'm sure they'll find enough ways to spoil you while you stay."
"Alina could have been rolling in money by now if she had listened to tata", Amelija shrugged. "I'd assume she actively doesn't want to be rich, considering her decisions."
Amelija's nanny - well, her older male cousin mama sent to keep an eye and see if she needed anything and make sure no one bothered her - Nikola, smiled at her mischievously, the corners of his handsome dark eyes wrinkling a bit. "That's your secret, then? You're just that good at obeying people, huh?"
Amelija gave him back a brilliant yet vaguely predatory smile. "Aren't I? We're both here because of it."
"I wouldn't dare suggest otherwise."
"What is your plan anyway, if I may know?" Antoinette asked. Amelija opened her mouth, trying to improvise a half-truth that would be vague enough that her parents couldn't stop her even if they found out what was going on, when Nikola - that stupid loudmouthed bastard, started talking.

"Well, auntie and uncle agreed to send her only if she has an older man to accompany her on such a long trip, given how frail she is", he winked at her, "and, well, they wanted to send my dad, which - I'd say, it would not make for a fun trip. Luckily, I stepped in to save her."
"He was going anyways", Amelija gritted through her teeth. "Nikola is a biologist, he's writing a book about the flora and fauna of North America. So we agreed that I'd wait until summer and go with him. After that, he can wander off and do whatever the hell he does and I can stay with Alina."
"Ah. So you'll be together until you reach New York and go separate ways, then?"
"That's right", Nikola pinched Amelija's round cheeks, wiggling her face. "But don't tell Aunt Jelena. She was adamant that Amelija, her perfect sweet baby child, needs a chaperone to call if she gets a runny no-"
"I am going to murder you in your sleep-"
"Fair enough", Antoinette said. "That's convenient."
"What's convenient is", Amelija wiggled out of Nikola's grasp, "that my parents trust Nikola completely, and think he's a perfect upstanding young gentleman. Conveniently, I'm the one who has been planting that idea in their heads for nearly two decades, because if they'd heard any of the things he does on his trips, neither of us would leave our houses ever again."
"You watch my back, I watch yours", he smiled charmingly again. "Besides, they do know one thing I do on my trips."
"Which is?"
"I study the flora and fauna of the world", he said smugly. "I do have a doctorate."
"If by flora and fauna you mean tobacco, wine, and handsome me-"
"Enough", he said suddenly. "Science is a serious matter. And the reason why we're both here, so let's leave it at that."

ooo
A

Amilija saw a young blonde-haired sailor looking at her like he was seeing a ghost, but it only lasted for a second before he tipped his hat and scurried away. The rest of them were busy enough, shouting orders among themselves and preparing to set sail.
Nikola came up next to her and dropped their bags unceremoniously to the

floor.
"Careful, I have important things in there", she hissed.
"If they were that important you'd carry them yourself", he retorted. "I need a cigarette, and you're welcome to join me if you'd like. I won't tell your mom." Nikola took a cigarette out of his pocket, lit it up, and made himself comfortable on the nearest bench. Amelija sat next to him, taking a puff when he offered.
"Your sister always was a weird cookie", he remarked.
"Yes", she sighed.
"And now you're following her", he blew out a long cloud of smoke. "Imagine if you too find a hubby in New York and decide to stay. How would you decide who goes back? I propose fighting to the death."
"Like in your animal kingdom books?"
"Yes, assert dominance, become the alpha."
"I'm not staying", Amelija said. "I just wanted to check up on her and this man she's with."
"What do you know about him, even?"
"A very confusing mess of conflicting information." she paused. "I've no idea what to think. It seems he wasn't very... beloved back in Paris, but he's doing alright in New York. And he's treating her well, it seems. From what she's written, he seems to adore her, a lot more than even she knows."
"Saccharine."
"Ew, I know", she grimaced. "To think she once read Oscar Wilde with us and sassed everyone who flirted with her."
"She never was like us, not really", Nikola looked at Amelija gently. "You knew that."
"She was a prude, that's true."
"She was honest."
"That too."
Amelija went silent, sinking into a kind of low mood Nikola had occasionally seen her in during her childhood years; it wasn't easy to notice, but he was perceptive - her arrogantly beautiful face frowned just slightly, and if one listened very carefully they could notice her voice becoming quieter - sadder.
Nikola didn't like being around sad people for long; especially not his favorite cousin, so he thought quickly. Other passengers had also boarded the ship and now they were slowly coming out of their cabins, looking out

to the sea and talking among themselves.
"Alright, since we'll be bored to death on this ship for weeks, I propose a game", he said, struck by sudden inspiration. "Whoever digs out the juiciest secret on this ship by the time we reach Ellis Island, wins. We should get to know our fellow men after all and, maybe, God forbid, make some honest friends."

ooo
C

Coney Island, New York
The girl in Alina's office was an image of perfection: her red hair was perfectly combed and neatly tied, her light blue dress impeccably clean and pressed, and even her freckles symmetrical, tidy somehow. Her name was Hannah, and her behavior was very much like to her appearance: she never talked too loudly, she was never rude or disruptive, she never got involved in fights with her friends and she never, ever got bad grades, for as long as anyone who knew her could remember.
Which made it all the more bizarre that she was now crying inconsolably about failing all of her classes.
"Honey", Alina started, feeling too surprised to react properly. "What are you talking about?"
"I can't pass the final exams", the girl cried, shaking slightly. "I can't study, and I'll fail, and everyone will see it and I'll have to -"
"Hold on", Alina raised her hands in a calming gesture. "Who said that?"
"Nobody, but they don't know", the girl was no longer crying, but she seemed to be shaking slightly more, as well as gasping for air.
"Know what?" Alina still couldn't quite catch up, but she had a feeling this girl would spiral into something hard to control unless she stopped it on time. Yeah, no pressure.
"That I haven't been studying", the girl said, her gasping growing quicker. "I think I'm sick, I might be faint-"
"You won't faint, dear", Alina said gently and quietly. "You'll be alright. You're just a little flustered, this happens when people are upset sometimes. Can you tell me", she paused to think of something for a moment. "Can you tell me where your family lives?"
"Across the island." the girl managed.

"Do you know the street name?"
"Langham Street, Miss," Hannah remembered herself long enough to use the proper way to address her teacher.
"Are there any trees in front of your house?"
"Yes, Miss."
"Which trees?"
"One magnolia", she paused. "And a birch."
"Magnolias are still in bloom?"
"Not anymore, miss", Hannah's breathing was slowly going back to normal. "It's not their season."
"Ah. What a shame", Alina winked. "We had one in front of my parents' house, too. I miss it."
"Uh-huh", Hannah managed, unsure what to say. Was it proper to ask more about it?
"Would you like to take a walk with me, and maybe we can think of some solution better when we're outside among the trees and birds?"
"Yes, Miss", Hannah nodded.
The day was wonderfully sunny and warm, but not too warm; dandelion seeds fluttered around in the air, blown by the mild breezes of early June. Alina enjoyed the scene for a moment before turning to her little companion - Hannah's copper hair glowed like liquid metal in sunlight, but her expression made Alina imagine a tiny raincloud hovering right above her head.
"So, what's stopping you from studying for your finals?" Alina said casually, stopping to look at a particularly curious tulip. It had been yellow a month ago, but some kind of disease - Alina could not remember the name, even though she had seen it already back home - was slowly turning its petals bright red, as if it was bleeding from the center to the outside. It was beautiful if a bit morbid.
"Nothing", Hannah shrugged. "I'm just lazy."
"That can't be true, can it?"
"I get home every day, and I do nothing", Hannah replied, growing slightly frustrated. "I stare at my wall for hours and I don't do anything. I can't make myself do it anymore. It's been going on for weeks."
"Huh." Alina raised her eyebrows. "Laziness is not something I encounter very often."
"Sorry?" Hannah looked at her. That sounded fake. Everyone was lazy.

Even though she worked so hard to weed that out of herself.
"Yes, well, laziness is rarely the answer. Usually, the child either has no reason or motivation to do something", she waved her hand dismissively, "in which case it's quite understandable, and we simply have to find one. You, however, do want to study. Your grades are important to you."
"Yes, Miss."
"Which makes me think of the other possible option - something's stopping you."
"But what?" Hannah felt her eyes welling up with tears again. "Nothing's different. Nobody's bothering me. My parents are at work all day, and I have enough peace to study. But I don't do it."
"Your parents work all day?"
"Yes. They sacrificed everything for us - my sisters and me. I can't let them down", she felt panic well up in her chest again.
"Nonsense, dear, you're not letting them down", Alina smiled. "Now, tell me more. What do you think about when you go home and stare at the wall?"
"Nothing."
"Really?"
"Mostly about how I need to get moving and start studying, or I'll fail."
"And then?" Alina raised her eyebrow.
"I'll let everyone down."
"That's very scary, isn't it?" she said carefully. Hannah was extremely sensitive; everything she did, she did to please others. It was not something Alina could relate to - she could understand Hannah's feelings of duty and her desire to be "good" and "perfect" in everyone's eyes, but if Alina, personally, had to act the way Hannah did - she was quite sure she'd have either snapped or ran away much, much sooner than this. In the face of impossibly strict standards, there were mostly only two options the child would choose between, in Alina's experience. One of them was kids like Hannah - when told "you're not good enough", they'd cry and beat themselves over it, promising to try harder until the adults were pleased. Alina just happened to belong to the second group - the ones who, when told "you're not good enough" would say "fine, then I'll be terrible", and stubbornly go their way. Which ones are crazy, then? I'm not sure. I wonder what Amelija would say to this.
"That would be awful", Hannah admitted.
"Would they punish you?"

"No. They would just be very disappointed", Hannah swallowed. "Mama said they had to go through such terrible things to get here and to make a decent living… and I can't even pass my exams."
"Have you ever failed an exam, dear?" Alina asked, trying very hard not to seem annoyed.
"No, but…" Hannah trailed off.
"Hmm." this was not the type of problem Alina was accustomed to, really, and she tried to think of something to say - something helpful, whatever that might be. It probably wouldn't mean much if she just told the girl she had no chance of failing - other students may have started studying a few weeks ago but Hannah had started nine months ago, in September, on the first day of school. It was true, but Hannah probably wouldn't believe her. The only thing that could make her fail would be her nerves. Let's not tell her that.
"Alright, let's suppose you fail", she said. "What then?"
"Then my parents would be dis-"
"Yes, alright. But what would happen? You've had stellar grades throughout the school year. Do you know what happens when you fail the summer finals?"
"You… go again in August?"
"That's right", Alina said. "You just try again in two months. It's a bit inconvenient to study over the summer, I'll admit. But it happens all the time."
"Really?"
"Yes, of course", Alina laughed. "Plenty of people who are now perfectly happy and have finished school have at some point failed something, and plenty of children will fail again this year. Failing something is a part of life. It doesn't make you stupid, or worthless, or a failure."
"What does?" Hannah asked. Alina had never heard her ask so many questions before - Hannah, bright, serious, mature, always simply answered questions, and correctly, too. Hannah had spent so much time doing the right things that Alina had a feeling she didn't have the gall to ask if they were right all along.
"I don't know", Alina replied thoughtfully. "What if nothing does? As long as you live, maybe you're not a failure."
"That's not true", Hannah narrowed her eyes at her. She's contradicting me now, too? Maybe I'm so good with naughty kids because I'm the one ruining

them? That would be fun.
"Maybe so, maybe not. But it's what I think. As long as you breathe, you can turn your life around, so you're not a failure. And as long as you're a decent person trying to do good, I will never think you're a disappointment", she said gently. "Even if you fail. And we've spent a lot of time together, so I can confidently claim you are a good girl who tries very hard and cares very much."
"Oh." Hannah smiled and blushed slightly, unsure what to say.
"Now, if you pass, what happens then?" Alina continued. "What will you do?"
"I… don't know", Hannah admitted, slightly surprised.
"Do your parents ever reward you for your excellence in school?"
"My mom bakes me a cake, or teaches me a new crochet pattern", she replied. "Dad takes me to the fair sometimes. If I've been good I get to pick something for myself."
"What would you pick?"
"I like ceramic birds", Hannah admitted. "The ones that can whistle."
"Well, so it's safe to assume if you pass these exams you'll get a cake, a day at the fair, and a ceramic bird?" Alina smiled. "That sounds pretty good, doesn't it?"
"Yes", Hannah smiled.
"So all that's standing between you and all that stuff is surviving the next two weeks, isn't it?" Alina smiled.
"I guess."
"The exams are not that hard, darling", Alina looked her in the eye. "You are the best in the class. Even if you took them right now, you wouldn't fail them. You know that, right?"
Hannah blinked, looking uncertain.
"You don't want to just avoid failure, do you?", Alina continued, gaining some confidence. "Don't try to be modest, now. You want to succeed. You want to get good grades and make your parents and teachers proud, and you want to get all those presents knowing how much you've deserved them. You want to be proud of yourself. Isn't that right?"
"I do", Hannah admitted, looking slightly embarrassed.
"There's nothing wrong with it", Alina grinned. "Now that you admitted it, I can tell you - if you start now, you have a very good chance of doing just that. Sweep everyone off their feet and spend the summer knowing you're

one of the brightest kids in my class. I'll be rooting for you."
Hannah laughed a little in embarrassment but said nothing. "I'll try."
"No, you'll win", Alina winked. "They've got nothing on you."

ooo
S

Sitting in the shadows with crickets chirping loudly all around, Erik got so lost in his thoughts he almost didn't notice Alina passing him by. He stood up too abruptly - stumbling slightly as his vision went black - and hurried after her.
"Hello. You're out early", he remarked.
"I need to go home before I cook in my skin like a lobster", she replied.
"How is it so hot outside?"
"I'm not sure. Do you know any way I could just cease existing until, say, mid-September?"
"If you find a way, let me know", she puffed. "I hate to say it, but maybe I need one of those nifty little ladylike fans."
"Might help."
"How was your day, anyway?" she smiled, turning to him.
"Humid."
"Aside from that?"
"Well, I taught Piotr how to draw a cat, per his request. I take full responsibility for all the half-finished cats you find around the house, especially the ones near the bottom of walls, approximately at the height of a four-year-old child."
Alina laughed. "I wouldn't dare remove them."
"I knew you'd say that, but Yana still insisted that I say it's my fault and not hers", he shrugged. "And how have you been?"
"Uh", she puffed. "Things have a way of falling apart near the end of the school year. People tend to fall apart, too. it's … straining."
"You've been anxious lately", he remarked.
"Yes. And you, too", she turned to him.
"Is this going to be my fault?"
"What? No? Why'd you think -" surprised, Alina raised her voice without realizing it.
"Because you said people around you were falling apart, and it was

straining to you", he also raised his voice, also without realizing.
"But that's not what I meant! I was asking how you were, how did you manage to turn it into -"
"I didn't turn anything, it's what you said - "
"Why are you snapping at me?" Alina stopped and looked at Erik.
"Why are you snapping at me?" he replied, looking stubbornly back.
"I'm n-" she started, then stopped. Her brow furrowed a little as she looked away to think. "Alright, maybe I was, but it was not my intention. I was surprised", she said back in her normal voice, gesturing with her arms peacefully.
Erik looked at her in stubborn silence for a few more seconds.
"Can we get away from the sun?" she gestured at the path in front of them.
Erik nodded, starting to walk, and Alina followed next to him.
A few more moments passed in stubborn silence.
"You know, I didn't mean -"
"I know", he interrupted, looking ahead. "It's not your fault. I misunderstood."
They were getting near the house now. Another minute passed in silence before Alina finally broke it.
"Why are you upset?"
Erik sighed. "I'll tell you later."
"Why later?"
"Because we're in the middle of the street, and because the sun is somehow managing to burn my jaw and neck through this collar, and because I'm already in a bad mood right now and would like some time in peace if that's alright."
"That's alright."
"Good", he sighed again. "You know, I spent most of my life wishing I'd live under the sun, and frankly I think this is some sick practical joke the world is playing on me."
"I'll race you to the nearest cave?" Alina offered, fanning herself with a handful of papers.
"Yes, and then you'd faint halfway there from the heat, and people would see a masked man carrying your limp body into a cave and I'd have to move to another continent again."
Alina's shoulders shook a little. "That's -"
"What?"

"That- I can imagine that happening", she started snickering. "Except if anyone stopped you on the street while you carried me, I'm quite sure you'd simply die of embarrassment."
"I'd come back to haunt you."
Alina burst out into real laughter. "Oh god. I can imagine that, too."
"I'd draw on your walls and fill your pockets with sawdust."
"You're going to hell for that!" she waved a strict finger at him, still laughing as she remembered the wretched sawdust that spilled all over her dresses and shoes for weeks.
"Would I notice the difference? Compared to New York in June?" he allowed a smile to spread across his lips, looking at her sideways as he stopped at the front door to take his key out. "You're at my mercy, mademoiselle."
"Oh! Spare some mercy for the poor madmazel!" she brought up her palm to her forehead, pretending to stumble dramatically as Erik rolled his eyes.
"I will when I see one", Jack's voice said behind them with barely concealed amusement as they both jumped up in unison. He passed by and waved at them, smiling smugly.

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A few hours later, as the first stars appeared in the night sky Alina knocked lightly on the door of Erik's room.
"Yes?" she heard from inside and opened the door.
Erik was lying comfortably on the floor under his window with his hands under his head, looking outside. As Alina leaned on the doorframe, he shifted his gaze at her and for a moment she thought he'd say something. He gave her a slight smile.
"That's not such a bad idea," she said. "Is it cooler on the floor?"
"It is. The stars are starting to appear, too."
"Ooooh", she walked over to the window and looked outside. "Oh, it's nice."
"I'd ask you to join me if you don't mind lying on- alright." Alina was already lying next to him before he could finish the sentence. She propped her head up on her elbow and looked through the window.
"I know that one. It's the evening star", she said. "Venus. Or, Danica in

Croatian."
"Don't you have a cousin named Danica?"
"I do. It's a common name. Wouldn't you name your daughter "daylight star" if you could?"
"What does your name mean?"
"Huh", she blinked. "I was supposed to be named Adelina. But my father misheard my mother when she told him and he wrote me down in the books as Alina. She said it should serve me as a reminder that you can't trust men to do anything right."
"That explains a lot", he coughed slightly with what resembled laughter. "I like Alina better."
"Somebody once told me it means 'noble child'." she turned to him. "What does your name mean? It doesn't sound French at all."
"It's not. I haven't the faintest idea what it means or why I got it." he shifted a little. "It's Swedish, I think."
"Are you? From Sweden?"
"No. Not as far as I know. Neither was my... mother, but maybe my father was. But I'm technically not French, either - if anything, I'll soon be American."
"Strange. I wouldn't put you down as American any more than Swedish, French, or Croatian."
"Where would you pin me, then?" he looked back at her with a strange expression.
"There", she pointed her finger at the horizon outside. "You're from that little crimson strip of the sky between the stars and the ground."
Erik blinked.
"Did you think you were the only one who could, God forbid, say something romantic?" she giggled at him.
"Oh, my sincerest apologies, madmazel. That did surprise me a little", he said gently as Alina laid her head down on his shoulder and looked at the sky. He shifted a little to put his arm around her.
Alina stared outside peacefully for what seemed like an eternity, enjoying the silence. After a while, she somehow managed to pull her attention away from the stars and ask the question she came to ask in the first place.
"Why are you so distressed lately?" she asked quietly.
Erik sighed.
"If you don't want to tell me- "

"It's your sister."
"Amelija?" she frowned. "She won't be here for at least another two weeks."
"I like to start worrying early, so I can get through most of the disastrous possibilities beforehand."
"Does it ever help?"
"No, life usually comes up with some disaster I haven't anticipated."
"Ah." Alina stretched a little. "Why is Amelija's visit a potential disaster?"
Erik rolled his eyes, trying to think of how to explain something so obvious to her.
"She's coming here to see how you're doing."
"Yes."
He rolled his eyes again. "As much as I'd like to believe it's purely a social visit to have fun with you, I can't help but think she's here to see if you're living in decent conditions."
"I think it's very normal that my family is worried. But my conditions are more than decent, and they'll soon be reassured", she replied.
"Even with your choice of the company?" he retorted sharply.
"Are you asking if my family will approve of you?" Alina turned to him.
"What difference does it make? They barely approve of me as it is."
"Practically, it does make a difference if they start digging around for me in Paris." and it does make a difference, you beautiful stupid… of course it makes a difference if everyone you've ever loved thinks I'm unworthy of you. I wouldn't send my child to live with me.
"That will not happen", Alina puffed. "Amelija will tell them whatever they want to hear."
"Unless she disapproves as well."
"You wouldn't say that if you knew her", Alina frowned with slight annoyance. "I can't prove this to you now, but you'll see. Amelija is much smarter than you give her credit for. She'll understand."
"But-" isn't that the whole problem?
"I don't want to argue, please. I trust my sister's judgment and her heart."
Erik sighed.
"Is that all?" she asked again. "Is there anything else bothering you?"
"I'm bothering myself. Nothing you should worry about."
"What does that mean?"
Erik stared silently through the window for a good few minutes, not giving any sign that he heard her.

"When I was young, there was a very simple truth I knew, but have managed to somehow forget in the meantime", he finally spoke. "Antoinette asked me once, right after we met if I was unhappy with her and - well, I was. She took it to heart very much."
"Huh."
"It's not that she was doing anything wrong, oh no. I was the happiest I'd ever been when I met her, and the more I knew her the more I loved her and never wanted to leave her house. But I was still myself, and I was miserable and never spoke, and it confused her because she thought she was doing something wrong. Am I making any sense for now?"
"You're saying that I can't somehow make you happy?" Alina asked.
"You're everything I've ever wished for", Erik replied with ardent sincerity. "And you do make me happy, but you simply cannot unmake what I am. No matter what you do, and where you take me, it will be the same, because I will be taking myself along too."
"Huh."
"And, as I've said once to Antoinette, it is not your fault", he finished. "I am moody, yes, and often easily angered, and at my core I am miserable. I have always been. It's not something I cannot live with. Can you?" he turned to her slightly.
"Yes", she said quietly.
"That doesn't mean I will be a threat to you", he added quickly.
"No, I didn't think so", she shook her head. "It just always shocks me a little when I run into things I can't simply tackle head-on and change."
"I know. But you can't", he looked at her. "I don't know, and it's irrelevant, whether I was born like this or it came over the years. It just matters if we, more importantly - you, can live with it."
"Hmm", Alina's eyes reflected the starry sky as she stared outside in thought. "We've done well enough so far."

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As good as Amelija was at fishing secrets out of people, it wasn't the same as actually being interested in them, and Nikola noticed that very early on. They didn't notice, thank God; she was incredibly polite and attentive to everyone but there wasn't any light in her eyes, and sincere joy in her voice

when she talked about the "friends" she made with other passengers. She was playing along - for the feeling of accomplishment, out of boredom, or simply because she didn't want him to worry. If he had asked her, and if she bothered to answer truthfully, she probably would have said it was all three.
To be honest, this visit to her sister was worrying her, and not just for obvious reasons. There were many conflicting feelings in her heart about Alina leaving her family - leaving her, first and foremost - without a second thought that she had not deemed important to think about or face until now. But now she would have to. Of course, if Alina turned out to be miserable, that would be horrible. But what if she turned out to be happy? In a strange land, with strange people, having built a new life for herself while Amelija stayed behind? What was she hoping to find, exactly?
She usually didn't go further in her thinking than that. As soon as she felt the pain of rejection, she'd seek out some company to distract her, and this time was no different - she turned around from the fence she was leaning on looking to the sea, and faced back to the ship deck, looking for some company. But there was nobody.
Nobody but that young sailor boy, who didn't have the time to react quickly enough and so she caught a glimpse of that same strange look in his eyes before he composed himself and tried hurrying away.
"Hello?" Amelija called after him, this time out of genuine curiosity for a change. She hurried after him, picking up pace. "Hello, can you help me?"
Being part of the ship crew - and the youngest one at that - the boy couldn't say 'no' to that particular sentence from an esteemed passenger, so he halted. Amelija anticipated that and stopped a few steps from him, choosing her words carefully.
"I, uh… are you busy? This ship is making me very sick, and I would like some company to distract me. My cousin is busy writing. I have some chocolates to share", she finished, smiling slightly.
It was a terrible lie. The sea was very calm, and she didn't at all look like someone who was seasick. The boy raised an eyebrow but nodded at her.
"As you wish, Miss. I'm at your disposal."
Amelija sat down, offering him some chocolate. He hesitated for a moment before taking one.
"You're very young. How long have you been serving?"
"Three years, miss."
"On this same ship?"

"No, I was on a different one until this year. Captain noticed me and said I was promising, so they transferred me", he said proudly.
"Congratulations."
"Thank you, miss."
A very uncomfortable silence spread out between them.
"So - "
"I've wanted to ask - "
The sailor boy closed his mouth, politely letting her finish.
"I couldn't help but notice you looking at me kind of afraid", Amelija said as gently as she could. "Why is that? You don't seem to be afraid of anyone else."
"Afraid, miss? I'm not afraid at all of you. You seem nice."
"What is it, then?"
"You remind me of someone I met around a year and a half ago, and it's... you look very much alike. That's all. I haven't thought about her in a while. I have no clue where she might be."
"Someone, you know?" Amelija stood up straight. "Some girl you met?"
"Not a girl, miss. Older than you."
"Was she your friend?"
"She was a passenger on my last ship, and yes, we became friends. But she, uh, disappeared."
Amelija blinked. "I beg your pardon?"
"She disappeared, along with the man who was with her, in, uh, unknown circumstances. People disappear all the time from the cheap ships, so it wasn't so strange. They probably tried to evade the border police", the boy fumbled looking away, obviously in distress, obviously hiding something.
"Uh-huh", Amelija said. "And I remind you of her?"
"You just look very similar. And the way you talk, too."
"What was her name?" she asked.
"Lena, I think. No, no, Alina." he stood up straighter. "She was nice. She helped me out with... some personal things. I think about her a lot."
"Funnily enough", Amelija said through her teeth, growing very tired of all the ghosts of her past intent on mocking her, "I have a sister of the same name. And you say she disappeared under mysterious circumstances?"
The boy paled. "I'm sure she's - "
"How are you sure, exactly?" Amelija said quietly, looking at him with ice-cold rage.

"Because I - the man would have protected her", he fumbled before realizing, horrified, that the lady may not have known about the man. Stupid, stupid, stupid, idiot-
"Ah yes, he would have?" Amelija raised her voice slightly. "You know, after all, I've heard, I'm inclined to believe he would have protected her! You have reassured me completely!"
"Oh, alright-"
"I was sarcastic, you- you- God damnit!" she stomped her foot in frustration.
"Sorry."
"What else do you know about them?"
"Well, miss, I can safely say I don't know where they went", thank God, "but I'm sure they are fine. They didn't die. They reached the shore safely."
"I know that yes. How do you know that?" Amelija demanded.
"Because, uh, I - I just do", he finished weakly.
"If you don't tell me everything you know right this instant I'm going to the captain and - "
"Alright, fine, stop yelling!" Desmond yelled, panicked. "I'll tell you! I'll tell you! But they'll have my hide for it, alright, if you tell anybody! I- " he lowered his voice, "I helped them escape because the man was afraid of getting caught by the border police. And Alina, your sister, wanted to stay with him."
"Wanted to, or had to?" Amelija asked sternly, pointing a finger at him. Desmond could feel his palms sweating like when he was a kid being interrogated by his mother. It didn't matter what he did; something would probably be his fault. (His mother was easily diffused by witty humor and quick retorts, which was incidentally how Desmond developed those skills).
"I'm pretty sure if she didn't want to she could have just let him drown on his own-"
"Alright, fine", she interrupted. "And you helped them out of pure goodness of your heart?"
"Huh? Yes. We were friends. And she… did me a huge favor", he finished, blushing slightly.
Amelija stared at him, milliseconds away from smacking him straight across his head.
"Nothing like that oh my God oh my God calm down she helped me write a

letter to my girl oh my God stop -" Desmond panicked, leaning away from her swinging hands. "She helped me write a letter, swear to God! My fiance wanted to leave me, and she convinced her to stay with me!"
"Did she?" Amelija hissed.
"Yes!" Desmond's voice went up a good octave higher in panic.
"And the man? What did you think of him?"
"He was like a badly-sealed barrel of gunpowder, to be honest. He avoided everybody for the entire trip. But he was nice when he talked to her, that's for sure. He wasn't uppity with me, either. I liked him."
"Again, a very low standard for goodness", Amelija grumbled.
"Seems that way, until you see him. He looks like every word he says, he has to rip out of himself by force. And I liked how he acted when they fought."
"They fought? Here?" Amelija asked sharply.
"Yeah, yeah, they argued. Everyone argues on the cross-Atlantic ships, miss. The sea gets to your head. But they - he apologized, and I liked that. Not many people do that around here."
"Alight, I believe you." Amelija slowly lowered her hands.
"You do?"
"Yes, Alina is a complete fool for other people's romances; I bet she still carries that old Jane Austen book around. Writing a love letter sounds like something she would do."
"Other people's romance, my arse", Desmond mumbled. "If she and that man aren't married by now I'll eat my own-ow! Ow! Stop it!"

Chapter 24:Courage

If somebody had bothered to ask Erik why he was always carrying bits and pieces of his symphony around with him, he would deny ever doing that and probably leave the conversation immediately. The truth was, he was carrying one particular part he was most proud of with him at all times - and the reason for that was his hope that he'd muster up the courage, one of these days, to leave it somewhere for someone to read it. He hadn't mustered up the courage yet, and as he passed by his favorite music venue in New York City he quickened his pace to make the tormenting moment shorter.

Not today, but maybe one day.

Today he had somewhere else to be, even though he didn't think it would be a particularly interesting event. Alina took her students' final exams incredibly seriously - and he wanted to be there not because he cared that much for a bunch of loud children, but for her. Her performance was also being judged. He hoped she'd remember to leave a chair in the corner of the room somewhere where he wouldn't be noticeable, or he'd have to wait in her office.

Meanwhile, Alina was still at home, getting ready. She was at least as nervous as the kids taking the damned exams, if not more. She felt a bit hypocritical about it - it was easy to tell Hannah that one exam didn't mean that much, and truth be told, for someone like her it didn't. Finals were usually only done as a single pen-and-paper test, and the grade would be added to the student's average grade - and that would be that. Most children and their parents only came today to pick up their evaluation papers, get congratulated and applauded, and go home for the summer. Only the rare few, whose grades were "in between" would be called for an additional oral exam in front of witnesses to raise their grade. Hannah was also among

them - her grades couldn't be raised because one couldn't go higher than straight-A's, but she would usually be called to read one of her essays or answer a few questions "to set an example of excellence". It was a tradition in some schools, and Alina loathed it. As she gathered her things and walked towards the school, she thought about it again - it was ridiculous to have children answer questions in front of a crowd, it was a ridiculous notion to have a child showcase school's prestige; she hated everything about it. Her mood might have been ever-so-slightly affected by the fact that her performance during the school year was also on the line - Dowling's evaluation of her work was key in her getting a proper teaching license for the State of New York. She had thought her papers and experience from London would mean more - alas, at least it was good for her to be in the same situation as her students once in a while if only to keep her grounded and empathetic to their struggles. It builds character.

What Alina was most concerned about were the kids in her other class, especially Walter - dear Walter who almost refused to even take the finals and nearly dropped out of school when she suggested it. Alina insisted that Walter should be given a chance to take the finals orally no matter how he did on the written exams, and in front of witnesses, to make the whole thing public and shut up anyone who might gossip that she'd inflated his grades. His reading and writing were getting better, and his studying had immeasurably improved, but it wouldn't mean much unless other people were there to see it - Alina couldn't very well follow him through life and explain to people how to work with him; he would have to do that part alone. If, of course, he cared enough to cooperate. And if his parents even allowed him to continue his schooling. If. If. If. So many ifs. None of that matters, it only matters what happens today. I hope Walt doesn't panic and run away. She entered the school, put down her things in her office, and took a deep breath before she headed to the classroom. Some children and their parents were already in the school courtyard, pacing; but neither Walt nor his family was anywhere to be seen.

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"I can see you, Walter", Yana said nonchalantly as she was carefully putting cakes into designated boxes. "Don't even think about it."

Walter stood up from behind the counter, still eyeing the piece of the movie he tried to steal a second earlier.

"I'm hungry", he said, wondering how she could have possibly noticed him there. He thought he was perfectly silent and out of her sight this time.

"You're late also", she replied. "You should be at school. All these cakes are going to your school, and you can have them after the exams. To celebrate."

"I'm not going", he said defiantly, looking at her.

"No?" she raised an eyebrow at the cookie that crumbled in her hand.

"No. And even if I did go, there would be nothing to celebrate. So you can just give me a piece right now", he folded his arms.

"No. You can have them at school."

"I reckon failing my finals will make me lose my appetite."

"You can have the cake if you fail", Yana turned to him and folded her hands as well. "You know what we do in my village?"

"I don't care."

"Don't sass the hand that feeds you, boy", she warned. "In my village, soldiers who get hurt or lose battle still get food. Workers who get hurt still get food. Little girls who can't learn to sew still get food. You know who doesn't get food?"

"No?"

"Cowards", she leaned closer to him. "Are you a coward, Walter?"

"Hey!" he raised his voice. "Don't give me that bull! I don't need Dowling coming at my ass again! I've had enough of his lectures!"

"So you're afraid of the principal?" Yana, on the other hand, lowered her voice to a whisper. "Is he stronger than you then?"

"Goddamnit! You can't tell me what to do!" Walter yelled, storming outside. "I'm not going, especially not because you bullied me into it! Have your stinking cake!"

"Yes, I'll see you there", Yana murmured, turning back to finish packing.

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Alina was in the classroom well before the beginning, and she welcomed the children who mostly arrived with their parents and settled down on their designated seats as parents stood by the walls - the desks were smaller and adjusted for children's bodies, so they weren't too comfortable for adults to sit in. Hannah O'Malley's entire family came, bursting with pride, and took their place by the wall next to her first-row classroom seat. After everyone arrived, Alina waited nervously for five more minutes before she announced the beginning - and surely enough, Walter snuck in and took his seat in the front row with the rest of the students who were supposed to take their orals. Judging eyes followed him across the room, and Alina made a show out of making eye contact with some of them and smiling very widely at Walt. Nobody from his family came with him. It fueled the pit in her stomach with some additional fire.

Alina first read the names of the children who had their grades rounded and congratulated each one of them as she gave them their papers and shook their parents' hands. It was a boring procedure - but the routine made her feel better and by the time the principal arrived for the oral exams, she already felt more or less like herself. Some of the crowd dispersed, but quite a lot of people stayed - whether it was out of respect or curiosity, Alina didn't know.

Walter, on the other hand, felt worse with each passing second. His hands shook with anticipation, and the dark circles under his eyes were more prominent than usual on his now ash-colored face. He had spent half of the night studying, which he would never admit to anyone - he cursed silently as he practiced his handwriting and repeated endlessly the names of various plants, capital cities, and the founding fathers. A year ago he was content to live his life as everyone else in his family did - struggling, working, and cursing everyone who had it better - and he wouldn't be able, until he got

very much older, to put into words exactly what made him want something else for himself or even try to get it.

All he knew was, that if he let himself and his teacher down without trying today, the hatred he felt for the world would be nothing compared to the disdain he'd feel for himself. Walter didn't care much for being a good boy, he'd never given much thought to whether others liked him or found him scary. But, by God, no matter how scary or bad they thought he was, he would prove to them once and for all that he wasn't stupid. He'd get that particular bit of respect for himself on this day, even if he couldn't control what the future held. Even if he didn't get a scholarship and spent the rest of his life in a coal mine instead of inventing machines, everyone would still know what he was capable of. Nobody could take that from him.

Knee-deep in the dread of his identity crisis, Walter barely registered when Hannah was called to read her poem. She was the last one before him, and if only he wasn't staring straight ahead in absolute horror, he would have noticed her smiling at him encouragingly as she passed him by.

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About half an hour after the exams started, the door opened quietly and two teenage boys entered, carefully and shyly, to stand in the very back row. Both had the same piercing eyes as Walter and both were fairly short; one of them smiled and waved a barely noticeable gesture at Alina. Walter's brothers. She was surprised they could make it - they both had jobs and bosses that weren't exactly the understanding type, but whatever witchcraft they did to bring them here today, she was thankful for it. Walter noticed them, too, and stood straighter with a mixture of horror and pride. He didn't even notice Alina smiling at him, as the audience of parents and teachers clapped for Hannah O'Malley who, of course, finished her school year with perfect grades and thunderous applause.

"Preston, Walter", principal Dowling called for him. Alina winked at him discreetly, but he barely registered it. Murmur spread through the rows of seated parents and other students as Walt stood up and walked slowly to the front of the classroom. Hank and Sam straightened up, listening tentatively. Hank looked to Alina like he might start a fight with Dowling if he made

Walt's life too difficult, and in that case, she would probably join him as well. Hang in there, Walt.

"Young mister Preston has been on a rather dramatic upswing lately", Dowling said, sifting through Walt's exams and essays. "Walter, can you tell me what motivated this sudden change?"

Walt stared at him, horrified. What exactly was he supposed to say? Teacher Alina shifted, attempting to say something, but Dowling gestured for her to keep quiet for now. She shrugged at Walt apologetically, smiling again.

"I don't know", he said. He could feel the eyes of everyone in the room on the back of his neck. He could practically hear them thinking how stupid he was.

"No?" Dowling said. "Nothing you can think of, at all?"

"No, I'm a bit too nervous to think, I can only answer what they taught me", Walter said automatically, not realizing his mistake until a burst of laughter spread through the room. Alina let out a surprised chuckle as well, before banging her palm on the table. Dowling leaned back, unsure whether to be angry or amused.

"Quiet, please", Alina said sternly, and her deep voice echoed through the classroom smoothing the ripples of noise. "I think we're ready to begin the exam now, so we'll judge for ourselves how well Walter's upswing has been going." she waited for another moment until everyone calmed down, as Walter felt the first beads of sweat traveling down his neck. The floor he was standing on suddenly felt further and further away.

"Walter, first question", Teacher Alina looked directly at him, playing with the quill in her hand. "Please listen while I dictate these equations, and write them down on the board."

Walter took a piece of chalk and started writing with a shaky hand - if she had asked him to write down anything other than math, he probably would have failed; his hand shook too much to write cursive. Alina had anticipated that which was why she decided to make the first question math and not

English or science - it was Walter's strongest point, and he would probably feel better afterward.

Walter stared at the equations he wrote down, feeling faint. He found out he still couldn't think at all but he could solve these equations because he had seen them before.

She gave him that same math problem for homework at least thrice by now.

Walter solved the equations remarkably fast, and as he stepped back to check his answer he noticed for the first time that nobody was giggling anymore.

"Remarkable", Dowling said behind him. "Mind if I give him another?"

"By all means, mister Dowling", Alina smiled.

Dowling gave Walter another set of equations - one he hadn't seen before, but it didn't matter anymore. His brain had already come back to Earth from wherever the hell it was hiding, and now it was going into overdrive. He solved that one, too.

"That isn't right", Dowling said. It was a sentence Walter had heard from him many times, but this time he actually sounded worried and not like he just really wanted to wring his neck.

Walter looked at him, then at the board again, panicking.

"If I may, Mr. Dowling", Alina chimed in. "Walter, which letter is that?"

"X", he replied.

"And the other one is Y, then?"

"Yeah."

"Yes, miss." she looked at him sternly, barely concealing a smile.

"Yes, miss. It is."

"In that case, the solution is correct", she proclaimed. "It's just Walter's handwriting that's barely discernible, but the handwriting is not what I care about in mathematics. Walter, do make more of an effort once we get on with English, alright?"

"Yes, miss," he replied, and a small twitch escaped the corner of his teacher's mouth.

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Alina and Dowling took turns asking Walter questions in math, science, and language, even some history and geography, all of which he answered - slowly, unsurely, and with long pauses as they switched from one subject to another, but he answered them all and he answered them correctly. After what seemed to Walter like two whole eternities (but was in reality around twenty minutes), Dowling leaned back in his chair, looking begrudgingly impressed as he turned to Alina.

"Miss Borichevic, I have to say, that was impressive."

"I agree", she grinned. "Walter often is."

"It seems, young man, that you have passed your exams", Dowling turned to him. "Has your thinking ability returned yet, or are you still only interested in showcasing your knowledge?"

"I, uh, I think I can think now, sir", Walter stuttered. The audience laughed again, for reasons he didn't catch.

"In that case, can you tell me how you managed to go from failing all of your classes last December to this, admittedly impressive, display of knowledge and studiousness?"

"I", Walter started. "I just, studied, I guess?"

"All of a sudden? And what made you so interested in studying?" Dowling pressed.

"I dunno."

"Last Winter I called you into my office, and you said you'd rather die than submit your English homework."

"I still hate English, sir," Walter admitted. "I like math and science. I can survive English, I think. Probably."

"And would you say your new teacher had something to do with it?"

"Yeah. Yes, sir. She's great." Walter fumbled.

"Great? Care to elaborate?"

"She helped me a lot." did he have to spell it all out? He was at his wits' end already. Couldn't he just go home now?

"If I may, sir", teacher Alina chimed in again behind him, and for a second Dowling looked like he wanted to roll his eyes before he turned to her and nodded for her to speak for a moment before leaning back in his chair slowly. Alina coughed a little, lazily and confidently with her chin resting on her hand, looking at Walt with proud intensity. She had the look of someone playing chess who already knew they won before the game was over.

"Walter has always been quite smart and eager to study. We simply had to work on some - specific problems with eyesight, that he's had since he was a child. But, in all honesty, this is all his hard work. I was merely here to show him in the right direction and not let him give up."

"Alright." Dowling gave up on that line of questioning and turned to face Alina, and Walter realized that was the first time he saw him sincerely smiling at anyone. "Perhaps that is true. Nevertheless, I'd say that our role is not to simply pour facts and information that mean nothing into our student's heads, but rather to raise them to do it for themselves. The results are certainly here. Congratulations, Mrs. Boričević. You've passed as well. From now on, for all I'm concerned, you're a full-time teacher in the State of New York."

Walter turned to Teacher Alina, surprised to see her put her hands on her blushing cheeks and let out something very close to a squeal. The smug attitude she had only a second earlier was completely gone now that her victory was confirmed with actual, real praise.

"Thank you!" she shook Dowling's hand, looking a bit shocked. Cordial applause echoed through the room, then people slowly stood up to leave as Hank and Sam walked up to Walter to hug him and ruffle his hair.

"I'll be damned, Walt", Hank said to him wearing the first smile Walt had seen on him in months, which wrinkled his dark-rimmed, tired eyes. "I've always known you were smart, but you're smart. Great job."

Sam, on the other hand, was visibly exhilarated. "Walt, that was incredible! Wait till we tell mom about this - she'll be thrilled, you'll see! We're all very proud of you!"

All of you are? Walter thought as he looked around - he couldn't see him, but he was certain he'd be there somewhere; he could feel the presence.

Did you like the show, Mister Demon?

Alina barely registered the parents coming up to her to greet and congratulate and thank her; she gave them her best smile and she rehearsed words, unable to process the world around her as she floated in a cloud of her victory.

Emily - sweet, uptight Emily who taught Walter's class before her - broke the spell when she came up to her and, in a display completely uncharacteristic for her, hugged her tightly.

"Uh", Alina managed.

"You were wonderful. You're going to be a wonderful teacher," Emily said sincerely, holding her shoulders. "Now, remember to rest over the summer, alright? We'll need you fresh and ready in September."

"I will", Alina laughed. "You, too."

As children slowly left with their parents, Hannah O'Malley left her mother's side and pitter-pattered shyly to Alina. After a moment's hesitation, she hugged her as well.

"Goodbye, Miss Boričević. Have a lovely summer."

"Goodbye, Hannah", Alina beamed. "Please, don't study until September. Oh, and take one of the cakes by the door."

"I will, miss."

Some of the other children turned their heads and also joined them and Alina shook their hands, patted their heads, ruffled their hair, and told them all the same things - have a nice summer, have a lot of fun, I'll see you soon - but it seemed they all wanted to hear them personally; and finally, when the crowd dispersed she saw in front of her the last little figure.

"Walter", she grinned. "Was it so bad, then?"

"Horrible", he laughed. "I'm a proper teacher's pet, now. You ruined me."

"Oh, don't worry. I think your sassy mouth tipped the scales back to normal," she ruffled his hair as well, and for the first time, he allowed it. "You did a magnificent job this year. Don't ever forget it, alright?"

"I won't forget it," Walter said, suddenly serious. "I won't." He stepped over to her and hugged her quickly as well, breaking away after a second. He waved at her awkwardly before running off to join his brothers, who were already counting the loose coins in their pockets and arguing about what to get him as a reward.

He passed a completely unsuspicious shadow on his way and stopped for a moment.

"Congratulations, Walt," the shadow said. "That was impressive. And very brave."

"Thanks, mister Demon."

Walter shifted a little on his feet and for a moment Erik thought he'd try to hug him as well. He held out a finger and looked at him sternly.

"Don't you dare", he warned quietly.

Walter grinned at him, running along.

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A few days later, Erik finally decided to confess to Jack that he did think about last winter's proposal to get him into music. Walter's courage simultaneously inspired and shamed him, and so he asked Jack to follow him to the small theater in downtown Manhattan - just to stroll through it, and perhaps see if Jack knew anybody who could help in getting them to talk to the managers or the conductor. Alina, of course, offered to follow along and so the three of them walked through the sleepy streets of New York one very sunny, hot afternoon, only days before Amelija was supposed to arrive. For someone who was supposed to maybe get a chance to try himself at what he loved doing the most - or at least talk to people who shared the same passion - Jack thought Erik looked far, far too miserable and anxious.

They walked on in uncharacteristic silence, unsure what to do about Erik's mood. Alina was just thinking of something to say to lift their spirits when Jack did it instead.

„Have you always worn this mask?" Jack asked with curiosity. Alina wondered if that would set off some flame, but Erik just shook his head.

„This one? No, of course not. My head has grown since I was a child. And I do need to wash them regularly."

"Oh, you have several identical ones? If you don't mind me asking this."

"I don't mind. The mask itself is just a piece of leather. I have several white ones and a black one, but I haven't worn that one in a long time."

"Why white? If you're always wearing all black?"

Erik scratched his chin a little bit. "I wear all black because it goes unnoticed easily, especially at night. But people expect something closer to skin tone in this general area," he gestured at his head, "and so black draws more attention. I even tried making a flesh-toned one, but I thought it looked horrifying. I don't know why. White just works better."

„It sounds strange, hearing about the logistics of wearing a mask every day."

„It's easier when you think about it like wearing eyeglasses", Erik's mouth twitched slightly upwards. „Even if the effect is... kind of the opposite."

"I wore eyeglasses when I was little," Jack said.

"Really?"

"Yes, I think I was maybe eight. They were expensive, too. My eyes were I don't know, I'm not a doctor. All I know is it got better on its own around the time I started growing. Around fifteen."

"Really?"

"I'm told it's not that uncommon. Actually, around the same time, another boy I knew got them as well, maybe a week before me. That was interesting."

"How so?" Erik turned to him.

"Because he was incredibly embarrassed by them, and so everyone teased him for it - except for me, of course, because I knew it was coming for me too. They wouldn't stop calling him four-eyes and trying to snatch them away. They drove him to tears once."

"Unsurprising", Erik mumbled to himself.

"Anyway, I noticed that, so when I got mine, I put them on my head right away and ran off to play. Other kids saw me and turned to me, like vultures smelling prey. It was almost theatrical. You know what I did?"

"No?"

"I turned to the nearest boy and yelled, hey, check out these prissy glasses I have to wear! They're so ridiculous! I'll bet you a nickel you can't put them on without fainting! And of course, the fool took the bait - hook, line, and sinker. Before you knew it, everyone was fascinated. They fought to try them on, and they all laughed with me as I cracked jokes at my expense. And two days later, everyone forgot about it. Nobody has ever called me four-eyes in my life, not after I called myself four-eyes on the first day. If somebody had, it would have made him look stupid. What's the appeal in teasing someone over something they don't care about at all?"

Erik walked on, looking ahead in dead silence, while Alina laughed. "I think you and I would've been friends as children."

"Not really, princess. I didn't make friends with gals back then."

"You little chauvinist. I can pack a punch. I was useful in fights, or so I'm told."

"And where is that alleged strength now? You can't sleep on your laurels forever, you know. You should either agree to spar with me or stop this false advertising -" Jack's voice echoed through the sunlit streets happily as they neared the site of Erik's worst fears.

„I can see why you like this place", Jack rambled on when they stopped in front of the venue. „It's interesting, I think it suits- " he turned to Erik and realized he was talking to thin air. Erik had vanished in the split second he wasn't looking. „Son of a!"

Alina snickered from his other side.

„What in the hell is he doing?" he turned to her. „Is this some kind of joke? One of your pranks? I certainly hope you haven't been toying with me after all the effort I was willing to go through to make this possible", you juvenile idiots, he almost finished.

„Our pranks? No, it's not a prank", she hurried. „Not that I know of, and I can't imagine it being so. He's scared."

„Scared?" Jack raised an eyebrow.

„I've come here with Erik at least five times already. He buys tickets for concerts but then we sneak into the corridors and listen to them behind the stage", she admitted. „He's never even sat in a proper seat as a guest and let them see him, let alone spoken to the musicians. He's scared."

„And all this talk about how he would do anything to be a musician?"

„Oh, he definitely would. But talk is easy, and doing things takes time. It's all good when it's in your head", she explained. „The fact he wants it so badly only makes it worse. He has more to lose if they reject him, and he knows it. He's scared that no matter how much he tries, and how hard he works for it, they'll still reject him. Can you understand that? Haven't you ever felt as if you were broken by design, and all effort will only lead to humiliation?"

„No", Jack shrugged.

„How disgustingly well-adjusted your life must be", Alina grimaced. „In any case, I'm certain he'll come around. But you might have to be patient. I don't know when he'll finally decide to do it, but I'm sure it will be when we least expect it. He has a penchant for drama, that man."

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When Alina arrived home later that day, Erik was already there, reading a book as he waited for her.

"Hello", she said cheerfully.

He looked up and smiled shyly at her as if he expected her to comment on his sudden disappearance, so she instinctively decided not to comment.

"What are you reading?"

"Self-reliance, by Emerson. Jack gave it to me a few days ago, said I should experience some New World culture, as he put it." he paused.

"Is it good?"

"It's interesting." he flipped through a few pages back. "I don't think you'd agree with all of it. But this bit is quite interesting. We but half express ourselves and are ashamed of that divine idea that each of us represents. It may be safely trusted as proportionate and of good issues, so it is faithfully imparted, but God will not have his work made manifest by cowards. A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best; but what he has said or done otherwise, shall give him no peace. It is a deliverance that does not deliver. In the attempt his genius deserts him; no muse befriends; no invention, no hope."

"Well said."

"Is Jack angry with me?" Erik closed the book slowly.

"No. I think he understands." she paused. "It would still be better if you talked to him yourself."

"Well, God will not have his work made manifest by cowards, so I probably should." he tapped his fingers on the book slowly. "I'm sorry for dragging you two along."

"I like being dragged along places", Alina smiled. "Have you been manifesting any new God's work lately?" she sat next to him, leaning her head on his shoulder, and closed her eyes as he started running his fingers through her hair.

"No", she heard him reply. Something in his voice didn't resonate quite right, and her first impulse would have been to turn around and ask him why - but she simply kept her eyes closed, and waited a few more seconds in silence.

"I haven't been... composing," he continued. "I can't right now."

"No?" she finally gave in and turned to see him looking intently at the paper stars hanging from the ceiling. "How come?"

"I don't know."

"Since when?"

"A few weeks, perhaps," he said in an impressively monotonous voice.

"Are you, like Emerson, concerned with what other people might think?"

"No", he said forcefully. "A little."

"That's quite normal."

"Mhm."

"I, for one, think you're no less of a genius for it."

"Have you ever stopped to think why I'm so good at the few things I can do?" he asked, looking at the ceiling again.

Alina raised her eyebrows.

"Because that's all I ever did. Every single thought and emotion I had for years went into it. I spent years, decades, pouring myself into music as if it was my only salvation, while the rest of you were out saving each other." he paused. "I've never given other people thought. I didn't think I should. I thought the art I created was enough to make me a man. I had to think so since I had nothing else."

Alina waited a little more.

"If I was wrong, and it's not enough, I don't know what to do."

"It's not enough," she said gently. "Nothing is ever perfect. No one thing can make you human enough."

"I know that now." he looked at her again. "I don't know what to do."

"Other things." she smiled. "It's alright to do other things too. Whatever you want."

"And then what? What will be enough?" he looked at her. "You've done many other things. Which of them was enough?"

"None of them. I'm starting to think maybe not being enough was what made me human all this time."

Chapter 25:Arrival

Amelija looked at the terminal as the ship docked with her suitcase in her hand and a heavy load in her heart. Nikola noticed it, of course, and her increasing moodiness as they approached New York was starting to grate on his nerves. Amelija was normally so good at evading her unpleasant feelings and weaknesses; but this was not something she could, or wanted to, evade and so she was left trying to process them - which she was decidedly not good at. Nikola silently prayed for the sanity of her hosts in the future weeks.

"It'll be fine", he said. "She'll be delighted to see you."

"Of course, she will", Amelija frowned. "Why wouldn't she be?"

Nikola shrugged, having no intention to comment on that.

It seemed like forever, but the ship finally docked and pulled down its ramps for them to descend. Nikola helped Amelija with her suitcase as she looked around for a familiar figure in the crowd. She had no idea why her heart was beating so fast. Her sister would not leave her alone in a foreign land; she'd be here. The reason she couldn't see her must have been because of the crowd, or because the bright sun was shining into her eyes, or because this foreign, unnatural, unfamiliar landscape with skyscrapers was so distracting -

"Amelija!" she heard a voice in the crowd she'd recognize anywhere and anytime. She turned around, seeing Alina pushing through the crowd with impressive force, strands of hair dancing around her excited face. She looked exactly as she remembered her, apart from the fact her usual, boring clothes were now gone in place of a very gentle-looking, pale olive-green dress that even had white lace on the bodice and sleeves.

Without thinking, Amelija dropped down her suitcase and ran with open arms toward her sister.

They clashed with alarming intensity as Alina laughed loudly and attempted to pull her up like when they were children; she only managed to knock the air out of Amelija's lungs and raise her off the ground half an inch.

"You're weak", Amelija laughed.

"Maybe you're heavy", she heard a reply. Alina let her go and before Amelija withdrew her arms, her fingers felt for two little metal points on the back of Alina's head and she swiftly pulled out two silver hairpins from her hair, sending it cascading down her back.

"Those are mine!" she hissed, holding them in front of Alina's face.

"You never wear them", Alina protested, holding her hair down against the wind.

"No? Maybe because they got lost halfway across the world?" she looked at her for a moment. "You look much better without them, anyway. You've even stopped dressing so matronly."

"You look the same", Alina replied. "Welcome to America."

Nikola strolled towards them, stopping to pick up Amelija's suitcase.

"Alina," he smiled as he kissed Alina's cheek. "It's good to see you again. You look lovely."

Alina looked at him like a dream she had as a kid had just come true. "Nikola! I didn't know you were coming! Oh, I was afraid I'd never see you again!"

"I'm everywhere", he winked. "I made sure your sister got here safely, and now I have to go."

"You're not staying? Maybe just for dinner?"

"No, no, I have a train to catch. I'll let you two make up for a lost time, and I might drop by before I leave for Europe again," he smiled. "I'm sure you'll have plenty to do in the next few weeks."

Amelija offered the pins back to Alina, who fastened her hair back into an updo before she caused a scandal. Alina pointed Amelija in the direction where their carriage was waiting and took her suitcase so Amelija could stretch and look around. The land was foreign, and people's faces looked foreign in some way Amelija could never explain. The air smelled differently, and even the sun in the sky was slightly… off. She looked around with interest while walking along next to her sister.

As soon as they reached the carriage a tall, thin, masked man dressed head-to-toe in black came out quickly, nodding at Amelija and holding his hand out to take her suitcase; Amelija opened her mouth when she handed it to him, but he simply turned around to put it on the top of the carriage. His right arm gave out slightly as he raised the suitcase above his head; weak from some old injury or general nervousness, Amelija didn't know. He stumbled for a moment, then secured the suitcase with straps and climbed down. He looked straight at Alina and asked quietly, "Can we go?"

"Let's," she said nonchalantly switching over to English as if it were the most normal thing and a stranger did not just completely ignore any politeness and decorum and pretend Amelija didn't exist. He entered back into the carriage as quickly as he came out, Alina following as she smiled and signaled the driver to take them back. Amelija stood still in shock for a moment, then snapped out of it and followed them into the dimly-lit carriage.

She sat next to Alina, both she and the stranger eager to be as far away from each other as possible. Alina didn't seem bothered by it as she spoke cheerfully. They looked to her like two threatened cats who met in an alley.

"Amelija, meet Erik. We came here together and have been together since", a sweet little smile escaped her mouth as she spoke, "Erik, this is my sister Amelija. She likes traveling and adventures, so I'm certain she'll enjoy staying with us."

Amelija didn't know what to say or how to introduce herself to this strange apparition, taken aback by his rude behavior and unapproachable appearance; for the first time in a long time, she felt at a loss for what to do.

Her discomfort lasted only for a second because Alina looked at Erik, conveying some pre-communicated message Amelija didn't know, and he bowed his head slightly at her.

"Hello."

"Glad to meet you", Amelija managed something resembling a smile. Gentlemen normally took her hand to greet her properly, but she felt thankful this time when that didn't happen and the man remained sitting still in his corner, his arms crossed with both his hands hidden.

"Likewise", Erik replied very quietly, taking care not to move. He felt somewhat bitter seeing sudden fear on her face where he could see joy and arrogance through the carriage window just a minute earlier. His first instinct would have been to get angry about it and leave, but he did, after all, promise only to meet her for one day; he'd have to endure it. I'll live.

"Now that that's settled," Alina said looking more than a little amused by what was to them an incredibly grave situation, "we should take care of the important things first. Amelija, do you eat vegetables now, or are you still an idiot?"

"You're an idiot", Amelija grumbled automatically.

"I'll take that as a 'no'. There's fish and potatoes with mangold for dinner, but since you're an idiot feel free to pick out the mangold. I'm not going to make separate potatoes; you're an adult now."

Amelija turned to her, completely forgetting about the masked man for a second. "Excuse me? Is this your idea of hospitality? Do you want me to write a letter to mama and tell her you're starving me?"

"Go ahead", Alina retorted. "Tell her you still don't eat mangold. See how she reacts."

"What's another nail in her coffin after everything you've put her through?" Amelija rolled her eyes. A ray of sunshine broke through the curtains illuminating them, and Erik could see they were a lot less like Alina's than he'd thought - instead of a warm, forgiving brown, they had a sharp and cold hazel-green color. The likeness he saw before dissipated immediately.

Alina grinned. "What doesn't kill her makes her stronger. How have you been, Amelija? How was your trip?"

"It would've been boring if it wasn't for Nikola", Amelija admitted. "Other than the fact that I met someone who claims to know you. Did you, by any chance, meet a blonde-haired teenage sailor about a year and a half ago? Thick accent? Slightly annoying?"

"Desmond?" Alina's eyes widened, and so did the masked man's. "You met Desmond? How is he? Is he still with Vanessa?"

"If Vanessa is his fiance, then yes."

"Oh, my goodness", Alina laughed. "Desmond! I haven't thought about him in months, so many things happened! Do you remember him?" she looked over at Erik, who smiled, seemingly relaxing only a little.

"Now that she said 'slightly annoying', it does ring a bell."

"Ha!" Alina snorted, beaming. "Desmond! The world is so small! I'm so glad he's doing alright!"

"Mhm", Amelija decided not to mention Desmond told her about having smuggled them to New York without passing border control - but the man seemed to catch on to that, as he looked at her carefully. She didn't like it.

"Oh, my, Amelija, I haven't seen you in such a long time! How have you been? What do you do these days?" Alina turned to her again.

"I manage our finances and estate", Amelija replied. "Other than that, I study. I party. It's all the same as it was."

"What are you studying these days?" Alina asked with interest.

"Philosophy."

"Oh? I never went much into philosophy. I always had the idea it was just a lot of lonely old men talking about how smart they are."

"You know, I like philosophy, but you're not wrong", Amelija chuckled.

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Alina stormed out of the carriage to unlock the front door with Amelija following and Erik politely taking her suitcase behind them. Amelija looked around, taking in the place she suddenly found herself in. The house was indeed quite small, and it looked like it had gone through some changes recently. They somehow managed to divide it into three sections - the front door led straight into a little kitchen/living room/dining room, with two doors leading into what Amelija assumed, was a bedroom and study. The third door in the corner led to a small bathroom. The kitchen was tidy - Alina had been well disciplined by Mrs. Bigley in London to keep her workspaces clean and neat. The living room part had a table with some chairs, and a few comfortable armchairs, as well as a small bookshelf that already held some books, Alina, must have bought after she moved. Fresh flowers stood on the table, and the walls were decorated with pictures and embroidery. It looked so… warm. It was a modest, but loving home; Amelija didn't know what she expected or how she felt about it.

"You can freshen up there, but let me show you your room first", Alina gestured towards the door on the right.

"I have a question first."

"Yes?"

"When did you learn to make these damned paper stars on the ceiling? You were terrible at it last time I saw you." Amelija pointed up.

Alina blinked in surprise and Erik stiffened behind her until Alina burst into laughter.

"Chalk it up to personal development", Alina ran her hand down her face. She cast a glance behind her shoulder, and Erik shrugged, do what you want, so she continued. "Anyway, Erik made most of these."

"Really? Your patience is impressive." Amelija turned to Erik, who shrugged again.

"Your sister made me believe they were important to her because they reminded her of her family."

"Ah. I see. Family is important to Alina", Amelija gave her a very sharp grin. Erik didn't like it one bit, but he thought it best to stay silent for now.

Amelija dumped her things on the floor of her room, ruffled her hair, and kicked off her shoes, deciding this was comfortable enough and any further unpacking would be postponed until she can be arsed to do it. She took a pack of cards and a small package and went back into the living room; she sat by the table and was just about to start talking when she was interrupted by a soft tapping on the front door.

"We're not expecting anyone", Alina looked over to Erik. "Are we? Did I forget something?"

"I don't think so. It's probably Yana."

"Yana?" Amelija asked.

"She's our best friend here", Alina said smiling brightly. "You'll love her!"

"Ah", Amelija replied, smiling back not brightly at all. She wasn't so sure she'd love someone who was Alina's best friend, seeing as Alina already had a best friend and it was -

Alina opened the door to reveal a very small, frail-looking woman with nearly-white blonde hair.

"Oh", she said. "Oh, your sister is here already. Sorry. I'll see you after work, I just wanted to ask -"

"I'll be there", Erik said, getting up.

"No need to have fun. I'll ask Svetlana - " she started, but he gave her a very particular look, and she smiled slightly and gave him her keys. "Thank you. Please don't let him draw on the walls."

"Unbelievable", Erik's mouth twitched upwards. "How long will you keep stifling his creative spirit? Does divine inspiration mean nothing to you?"

"I'll divine inspire you to scrub my walls, so don't let him draw on them", she tilted her head up to look him in the eyes, poking his shoulder.

"Traitor of the arts", he smiled at her and turned to Alina. "I'll be over, watching Piotr."

"Bring him here, if you want," she said.

"Maybe later. You two can catch up, I'm sure you'll have plenty to talk about." He nodded at Amelija and looked at Alina like he wanted to say something, but he quickly closed his mouth and nodded again. Amelija didn't understand what on Earth that was about, but Alina stood up suddenly.

"Oh, wait, I'll see you out. I forgot something at Yana's house anyway. I'll be back in a second."

She left promptly, leaving Amelija alone with an unknown woman before she could say anything.

"I'm Amelija, nice to meet you", she offered her hand and smiled weakly.

"I know. I'm Yana. I heard a lot about you." the woman shook her hand calmly and smiled at her in a way that reminded Amelija of those pictures of the kind, forgiving angels in her childhood books. "Alina talks about how she misses you all the time."

"Ah." slightly taken aback, she politely waited for the woman to start some sort of conversation, but Yana was much more comfortable with silence than Amelija, who broke after mere seconds.

"I don't understand anything that's going on with these two," she admitted. She had no idea how she was comfortable admitting it to someone she just met. "Are things here always like this?"

Yana smiled. "No, usually much worse."

"Oh God." she rubbed her temples.

"Don't worry. You get used to it." Yana smiled a little wider. "How long will you stay?"

"I don't know. A few weeks? Maybe some more? Depends." Amelija shrugged.

"Ah. Good. I'll see you often, then. You can come by if you want", she nodded and turned around just in time to get through the door as Alina opened it and came back in. Just how is this all being orchestrated? It's like a complex play I'm watching unfold, with everyone knowing exactly what the others will do and when. Do these people read each others' minds, or have I become deaf?

Alina closed the door, then looked around shyly.

"Can I offer you anything, Amelija?" she switched immediately back to Croatian. People switching language amongst themselves at will was also something Amelija would have to get used to so she wouldn't start speaking the wrong tongue to the wrong person; she considered drawing herself a cheat sheet.

"Yes, I'd like some wine and sweets."

"No dinner?" Alina raised an eyebrow.

"I can have dinner later. I have something for you", she announced, holding the package up. "Mom and dad sent gifts."

"Oh!"

"And some of it is from me, too."

"Thank you!" Alina took the package excitedly, starting to unwrap it and then setting it down. "Let me get you your snacks first. Sit down." she took out a bottle of wine, two glasses, and a platter full of cookies that she put in front of Amelija.

"Will you open it already?"

"Yes, yes," Alina threw herself wholeheartedly into ripping the paper as efficiently as possible and then gasped.

"I didn't remember it wrong?" Amelija snickered. "You still like coffee, right?"

Alina held out the coffee packet in the air with both hands like it was a king's long-expected firstborn son.

"REAL coffee!"

"There are more things."

"Can they measure with real coffee? Have you any idea how deprived I've been?" Alina put the coffee back down and looked at the little photograph that was hiding beneath it. Two people stood hugging each other, well-dressed and proud, smiling smugly back at her. Amelija and Nikola.

"Oh." she held it close to her face, her eyes getting slightly glassy. "Is this…"

"From Nikola's doctorate ceremony", Amelija nodded. "He took us out to dinner later."

"I'm so sorry I missed it", Alina said, looking at the picture. "That haircut suits you well."

"Every haircut suits me well. Get to the real stuff already, I can't stand you sniveling over this picture."

"You mean this?" Amelija held up the earrings - beautiful golden things, with deep-red, tear-shaped garnets hanging from them.

"That one from mom. She said you asked her if you could have them when you were little."

"I remember", Alina said. "She said I could have them when I get married."

"Well, apparently she loosened up a bit. Look at the other stuff."

Alina dug through the other stuff - a beautiful leather-bound journal from her father, a delicate silk scarf from Amelija, and a little glass bottle the size of her palm from Nikola, with dry yellow flowers inside.

"Are those…"

"Yes, immortelle." Amelija raised her eyebrows. "He said you shouldn't forget what home smells like."

Alina pulled the cork off the glass bottle and sniffed.

"Oh, my god."

She was sniveling now.

"Oh, dear." she sobbed. "I… I'm sorry, I didn't expect this. I haven't been home for so long - this - brings back -"

Amelija looked at her for a moment before interrupting her. "Immortelle doesn't wilt. You can always come back home, always. Remember that. Alright?"

Alina nodded, looking at the flowers.

"Do you remember how to play briscola?" Amelija started shuffling cards, for lack of better things to do. She couldn't stand this emotional display for too long.

"I know how, I'm just not very good."

"That'll do. I like winning."

ooo

After having expectedly won a few games Amelija heard a loud bang on the door that startled her, followed by a quiet "softer, Piotr, softer" as Alina hurried to open it. Standing in the doorway Amelija saw Erik standing behind a small boy, around four years old, with pale blonde hair and some sort of toy in his hands. The boy said "Hi!" to Alina excitedly and then ran past her straight into the room, climbing on the seat next to Amelija. Erik looked at Alina and shrugged.

"Yana's back, but he insisted he would not be able to sleep until he met the lady from across the world. I'll take him back soon."

Amelija looked at the kid sitting next to her and smiled a little, unsure how to talk to a boy so young. The boy grinned at her confidently, as if she was going to break into song or do something extraordinary right before his eyes.

"Hello", she said.

"Erik says you're Alina's sister," Piotr said, speaking in surprisingly clear English.

"He's right."

"You're very pretty", he went on cheerfully. "Did you get here on a ship?"

"I did."

"I got here on a ship. With mama. But I was a baby and I don't remember it", he continued. "Do you remember it? How was it?"

"I do." Amelija laughed. "Well, a bit boring, to be honest. But my cousin was with me, so he kept me company."

"Does the sea go on forever? Erik said the sea goes on forever. He says it looks like a desert made of blue glass."

"It does look like that", Amelija had to admit she liked the comparison.

"Did you see any mermaids?"

"Sadly, no."

"Are you a mermaid?" he asked suspiciously. "I won't tell anyone."

"You can't ask her that," Erik said, sitting across from them.

Amelija looked at him curiously, secretly relieved that someone was taking over.

"Why not?" Piotr turned to him, annoyed.

"Because you just met her. You can ask people to tell you secrets only if you know them well." He smiled slightly at him. Amelija suddenly noticed that no matter how loudly Piotr was talking, Erik kept his voice soft and low.

"Maybe tomorrow?" Piotr turned back.

"Mmmmmaybe," Amelija pouted, playing along. "If you win me over." Erik looked at her, his icy demeanor from before cracking just a little bit.

"I guess you have to sleep now, so tomorrow comes sooner", Erik said to the boy.

"Fine", Piotr said with all the annoyance of a child aware he was being played, and obediently hopped off the chair. "My mama's here anyway."

Erik followed him out, handing him over to Yana who already waited in front of the door, having very little faith in Erik's ability to put him in bed on time. She bid them goodnight cheerfully as she lifted Piotr in her arms and promptly left. Erik announced he was tired and would keep them company tomorrow, excused himself, and left to his room without another word. The whole theater, it seemed, was over for today.

ooo

"Možemo mi pričati po naški, ili si ga već zaboravila?" Amelija turned to Alina as he locked the door, preparing herself for a conversation she was not eager to have, but would have to anyway. It was better if nobody understood them, even if the chance of them hearing it was slim.

"Idi kvragu, Amelija", Alina laughed back.

"Good to see you're still yourself", Amelija continued in Croatian. "How have you been?"

Alina looked ahead for a moment with a slightly dreamy glint in her eyes. "It's hard to explain, you know?" she cast a glance at the paper stars on the ceiling. "So many things have happened. I think I've changed a lot. I don't fully understand what direction my life is going, but I'm eager to find out. It's going somewhere, that's for sure."

"Are you happy?" Amelija decided to cut straight to the point. "Here?" she gestured around her, hoping Alina would get the implication of 'here'.

"Yes", she turned to her, a little surprised by her questions. "Have I ever stayed somewhere where I didn't want to be?"

That certainly stung, but Amelija didn't let it show. "You know, mama and tata would take you back if you decided to return. In case all of this didn't work out."

"Did they tell you to tell me this?" Alina raised her eyebrows in annoyance. "That they'd take me back with my tail behind my legs if I failed? Thank you, but it won't be necessary. Has it ever occurred to any of you that I might not fail? Is it so hard to believe that I might know what I'm doing, and be capable of succeeding?"

"It's not just that", Amelija said. "I don't speak for mama and tata, nor do I put as much importance on their opinion as you do."

"I don't -"

"Oh, for God's sake, Alina, if you didn't then you wouldn't be so angry right now. Stop insulting my intelligence. You had to cross the Atlantic so you could pretend you don't care about their opinion, and you know what, that's fine." Amelija felt herself also getting annoyed, against her own will. "Your choice of company is strange, and I don't really understand it, but that's also fine. You're allowed to stay where you want to be, as you have so eloquently put it, I just wanted to make sure you're safe."

"I'm safe, and there's nothing wrong with my choice of company", Alina replied stubbornly. "And maybe if you could get your nose out of the clouds -"

"Excuse me?" Amelija interrupted her, raising her voice only slightly in fear that she might be heard through the thick wooden door. "My nose is in the clouds? After I crossed half the world to see you, after all this? After you proclaimed you were too good for your country and your family and decided never to see us again? After you left me all alone with them?" She spat out the last sentence before she could stop herself, and crossed her arms angrily, looking ahead. She wasn't going to say that.

Alina, on the other hand, looked at her like she had just seen the sun for the first time.

"I'm so stupid", she said softly, shaking her head. "I understand now. Why didn't you say so before? All these years?"

"Would you have come back?" Amelija hissed at her.

Alina thought for a moment. "No. I don't think I'm too good for it. But there is no place for me there, and you know that."

"Then it would not have made any difference."

"It would have made all the difference, Amelija", Alina waved her hands impatiently. "It makes all the difference in the world whether you tell people honestly how you feel! How many times do I have to repeat that? Mama and tata are fools, yes, but you are smart enough to understand it!"

"Don't you dare tell me what I'm like!" Alina hissed again, standing up straighter. "You haven't seen me in years! You have nothing to know about me!"

"Yes, and now you're here, and I feel like a lost piece of my heart has returned to me! I can't wait to get to know you again!" Alina crossed her arms in front of her, looking at Amelija defiantly.

Amelija frowned back at her, fuming silently. "You win this one, you manipulative bitch." she leaned back in her chair, mirroring Alina's crossed arms. For a moment, neither of them said anything, both pouting silently and looking in opposite directions.

"Your darling is very rude to me", Amelija mumbled.

"Yes, I know. He doesn't mean to be, he just wasn't raised the same way we were." Alina puffed. "Give him a few days, he'll relax."

"Fair enough." A more open talk about Alina's strange companion would have to wait some more; Amelija didn't have any energy right now to show any more goddamn emotions.

"Amelija", Alina said. "I want you to enjoy yourself here, alright? I'll take you out tomorrow, and we'll go sightseeing. I'll buy you dinner somewhere fancy. We could go see a play or something. Whatever you want."

"I haven't been to the theater in a while."

"See, we could do that. You also really have to see the city, it's impressive."

"Alright."

"It's getting late. We should go to bed or you won't have any energy tomorrow."

"Fine", Amelija stood up and went to her room, stopping for a moment. "I'm sleeping in your room? Where will you be?"

"The bed is big enough for us both, but if you want privacy, I could sleep in the other room", she gestured to the other room, smiling shyly. "Well, unless Erik fell asleep with his door locked, in which case, tough luck."

Amelija laughed. "Remember when we were kids visiting aunties? How they'd always cram us in the same room?"

"Oh, I remember", Alina grinned. "I remember you taking up the entire double bed and pushing me off while I slept."

"That was one time! You, on the other hand, always took all of the blankets to wrap yourself in, like a giant selfish pancake!"

Alina spread her arms wide. "To soften my fall when you threw me off the bed."

"Fine, you can sleep here, so I can have my chance at revenge." Amelija turned around and left for her room to change. Alina, having another thought, went to Erik's door and knocked lightly to wish him goodnight. She waited, but no answer came.

He probably really was already asleep with the door locked.

Alina turned around and went to her room, throwing herself on the bed next to Amelija and falling asleep immediately.

Chapter 26:Family

Paris, 1893, a few weeks before the Opera Ghost scandal.

Antoinette's voice was never exactly "soft" or "easy to ignore" in the first place, but she shouted, to be precise, really screamed - approximately once or twice every decade, and every time she did, someone would end up severely traumatized. She was very close to it now, and the young man she was currently speaking to would end up traumatized by it. It wouldn't matter if it did the trick - Antoinette was desperate to try and dissuade him by any means necessary from this incredibly, insanely twisted plan. The young man, looking at her with feverish, glassy, darting eyes didn't seem to listen to her.

"Helping her doesn't give you the right to control her. She has the right to choose what to do with her life." Antoinette said sternly. "People have the right to love who they love!"

"Yes, people", he spat out bitterly as his fingers tapped some frantic, unsteady rhythm. "And I am somehow magically, miraculously, exempt from that category!"

"You're not!" Antoinette pointed an angry finger at him. "You are a person, and you have the responsibility to act like one!"

"Responsibility?" Erik raised his voice as he stood up and started pacing around furiously. "What responsibility? The only responsibility I've ever had was to not make anyone's life miserable! To exist as little as possible in the eyes of others! What responsibility are you even speaking of? I have precisely zero capability, or opportunity, to do anything good!"

Antoinette felt a sharp pang in her heart, but she was not so easily out-voiced, and she opened her mouth again to retort -

"Let me speak, Antoinette! You know I'm right!" he thundered. He also noticed his fingers twitching again, but he ignored it. "Is this a life, do you think, of a normal man? Do you find it fair to lecture me about responsibility, when life has given me nothing in return for my last decade of so-called good behavior? Is my quiet, non-disruptive life going to get me out of this goddamn hell? Is it going to weed the rot out of me?" he stopped to look at her, forcing the black spots out of focus. "I have done everything you have ever asked of me. I have spent the past eleven years pretending, for your sake, that I was simply a mirage content with roaming around undisturbed. But I can't go on like this any longer. I won't be a ghost anymore. I don't care if I turn into a monster instead, as long as I can say I existed at all!"

"I would have helped you if you'd wanted it. You know that. It wasn't me who wanted you to be a mirage in the walls." Antoinette looked at him thoughtfully, lowering her voice. "This isn't like you. The man I knew wouldn't do this. And I won't let you do it, no matter how much I love you."

He stopped to look at her. Seeing the fury and disappointment on Antoinette's face cracked a hairline crack in Erik's heart from the top straight to the bottom, one that he would never fully heal from or forget. He didn't let it show at all.

The next words, uncharacteristically calm and calculated for him, were carefully chosen to drive the knife back into her own heart. "Love me? You left me here, Antoinette. No, you didn't mean to, but you moved on with your life. As everyone does. And I stay here." he paused. "The man you knew has reached his limit. Perhaps it's time for him to die, one way or another."

"If that is true, he will be missed." Antoinette turned around on her heel and started walking away with feigned determination. It was the hardest thing she'd ever done - but she had to stand her ground. She knew it. She told herself so, as she struggled not to let tears stream down her cheeks.

Erik looked after her, still and stiff as a board, until she was out of sight. The last bridge that connected him to his heart and mind had just burned, and he could already see black spots in the corner of his vision spreading as the rot grew bolder and more powerful.

July 1895, Coney Island

Alina woke up early to the grey sky outside that waited like an empty canvas for the sun to spill its red and yellow paint over it. She heard some faint rustling from the other room, but no voices. Amelija still slept soundly next to her, wrapped up to her nose in the same blanket she claimed Alina would steal from her. It was too warm to sleep under blankets, but Amelija wasn't very bothered by it. Alina got up and left the room, thinking for a minute before she finally knocked again.

No answer.

"Erik, are you inside?"

No answer.

"Erik?"

"Yes, I'm here."

Not willing to play along with this waiting game anymore, she opened the door.

"Are you avoiding me?" she smiled at Erik lying on the bed in near-darkness, still in his clothes. He looked like he hadn't slept much. His curtains were almost always drawn across his windows; but even so, she saw a glint of white leather on his face.

"No." well, to be fair, the door was no longer locked at least.

Alina was going to ask then do you mind me joining you but talking seemed like a stupidly unnecessary thing to do, so she just entered the room, her hair and light nightdress fluttering behind her. Closing the door behind her and locking it, she simply climbed on the bed with him and

snuggled up. Erik's skin was always a degree or two colder than hers, which was quite pleasant now that it was hot outside.

"Did you have fun yesterday?" Erik asked, feeling his stupid traitor arms wrap around her against his will when all he wanted to do was keep them crossed and sulk in peace. He could feel the warmth from Alina's body radiating and warming his own as she lay her head on his chest.

"Oh, so much fun. But I missed you.", Alina replied into his neck. The soft blowing of her breath made the tiny hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

"Did you, now?" you seemed too preoccupied to miss me. A bitter, jagged old wound had reopened with tonight's dream. If he closed his eyes, he could still see the disappointment in Antoinette's eyes and feel regret over words he could no longer take back.

"Mhm." Alina knew him well enough to guess what he might be thinking and had no intention to continue in that direction of the conversation. Her fingers traced over his collarbones.

"Your sister doesn't like me."

"She has a lot of opinions about a great many things, but deep down she divides people into those who are nice to her and give her attention and those who don't. It's not hard to be her friend, as long as you are interested."

"And so far I haven't been nice nor given her any attention." he realized his fingers had somehow tangled themselves in with the loose laces on Alina's nightgown and stilled them, waiting to see if she would tell him to stop.

"No, but that's certainly easily remedied if you want her to like you. It's up to you."

"Hm." he wasn't too sure about that, but he had no reason to think Alina would lie to him. She wouldn't just force him to be around someone who would hate him from the start, would she? She had never done that before.

Unless Amelija was so much more important it didn't matter anymore what he -

"Alright." he sighed, hurrying to shut up that particular thought by any means necessary.

Alina shifted slightly. "I wouldn't lie to you. I've never lied about who would be a decent person to you and who wouldn't."

"I know, I know." he paused. "She has the attitude of someone who has never felt like they were nothing."

"Ah, she certainly seems that way. But she's not like that", Alina replied. "She... always had a problem with showing weakness. Especially to people, she doesn't know well."

Maybe she'd be less annoying if she did show something, at least, he thought. Unfortunately, Alina knew him well.

"Maybe she's not trying to make herself likable", Alina offered. "She's trying to make herself seem... unreachable. But she'll get tired of the pretense. Everyone does."

One thin, golden ray of sunshine peeked through the thick black curtains. Dawn was breaking, but the room remained almost completely dark. Erik suddenly felt itching all over his head. He was not used to wearing the damned mask all the time - that's why the room had these curtains and this heavy lock on the door, but now with one extra person in the house, he still did it just to be sure. He felt its presence bothering him now. Without thinking, he took it off and set it by the bed.

"I'm glad you came", he remarked as calmly as he could. "It was stupid of me to lock the door. You can sleep here anytime you want, if you want to, that is."

Alina snuggled closer and pressed her lips against his. She slowly brushed her fingers across his bare cheek and through his hair, barely enough to feel it. She heard a little sigh from him as he slowly returned the kiss.

Erik felt his stupid needy arms tightening around her and his stupid bastard face burying itself in her neck, and his stupid lovesick heart fluttering against his ribcage.

Amelija woke up alone in a strange bed, in a little room with colorful curtains drawn over the big window, full of dried flowers in little glass bottles (Alina did always have a very specific approach to decorating), and various books were strewn all over the desk that somehow managed to fit, along with the closet and bed, in the small space without making it cramped. She was just admiring the etchings on the desk drawers - little grapes, leaves, and vines - when she heard a knock.

"Yes?"

The door opened with Alina's head peeking through. "I made you pancakes." she was speaking Croatian again.

"Is that supposed to get me out of bed before noon?"

"It won't?"

"Of course, it will." Amelija sat up, rubbing her eyes as her big, fluffy brown hair spilled over her shoulders. "I was just admiring your desk. It's really pretty."

"Erik made that too", Alina grinned, turning around and switching over to English. "Amelija likes the desk you made."

"Thank her." a faint reply came from the living room.

"He says- "

"I heard." Amelija got up and grabbed some clothes out of her suitcase. "Some privacy, please, mom?"

"Alright." the door closed again, and Amelija got dressed and went out, only to find out she'd been fooled.

"There are no pancakes, is there, you wretched witch."

"No", Alina grinned, taking out a bowl. "But we can make them together. Pass me some milk." she was blindingly cheerful, annoyingly cheerful for so early in the morning. Amelija nodded at Erik, who was reading some book peacefully in the corner of the room. He looked up and nodded back. Amelija politely switched to English again in his presence.

"What are you reading?"

"The Brothers Karamazov." he held it up. "I found it in French. I don't know Russian well enough yet. I can only hope the translation is correct." he had prepared this response in case she asked, but he still had to force himself to say every following sentence.

"I've read that!" Amelija blinked. "Do you like it?"

"Uh", that he had not prepared for, so he had no idea what to say. "I don't know. I can't say yet. But it's interesting so far." It was the response he gave Alina the first time she asked him that question back when they first met, equally confused; he remembered her laughing as she replied she'd wait until he finished reading. She asked him again a few days later, and by then he was prepared.

"Hm." Amelija grabbed the milk and passed it on to Alina. "That's clever."

"How so?" Alina asked.

"Well, if you haven't read the whole book and people ask you if you like it and you say yes, and then you finish the book and the ending is garbage, then you have to find those people again and tell them you've changed your mind or they'll think you're a fool. If you say 'I don't know yet, then you sound profound and wise, because you don't form opinions too early."

Erik looked very offended by that observation for some reason even though it wasn't offensive, but Alina laughed. "Is that speaking from personal experience?"

"I'm still angry about the end of Crime and Punishment."

"You're angry about redemption?"

"I was hoping I'd get at least one good villain protagonist who doesn't repent in literature, and Crime made me believe that would be it. It was so interesting until it became like everything else."

"Classics are classics for a reason." Alina, with her unquenchable thirst for redemption stories, really didn't mind the ending to Crime and punishment.

"You're just a boring old lady. Go re-read Les Miserables and leave me alone with my vices."

"You're older than I was when you started telling me that", Alina remarked, whisking the ingredients Amelija passed to her in the bowl. Amelija stuck one finger discreetly in the flour bag and smeared it over Alina's nose.

"Really?" Alina raised her eyebrows. "You know what that means, right?"

Amelija smiled.

"And you're ready for consequences?" Alina grabbed a small fistful of flour and hurled it at Amelija, who dodged it just in time. Flour spilled all over the table and floor in a magnificent cloud.

"You have too many telltales, amateur. You always twitch before you throw it." Amelija laughed, circling the table until she got to the flour bag again. Alina, who kept her distance circling behind her, suddenly quickened her pace and instead of grabbing the flour with her left hand from the bag, threw another fistful from her right hand that landed directly on Amelija's face. Amelija, completely shocked, started coughing, sneezing, and wiping the tears from her watering eyes.

"You bi-"

"Conceit was always your greatest sin, Amelija. Don't assume you've got people outsmarted until you have."

"I didn't know you finally learned to properly use your right hand, spawn of Satan-"

"Properly? No, I didn't", Alina laughed.

"Fine. You win." Amelija straightened again, suppressing her cough. "Oh, God. I think I've got an eyelash stuck in my eye. Is it in my eye?" she rubbed her eyes again.

"Don't rub it -"

"Come look and tell me if I've got something in my eye."

Alina stepped over and looked, cupping Amelija's face gently. "I don't see anything."

That statement soon proved to be too true, as another fistful of flour exploded directly in her face.

"YOU- "

"What? Now we're even."

"Alright, fair." Alina looked over to Amelija, still with flour on her face and hair, imagining she probably looked the same. "Whoever washes first is a coward."

Amelija nodded solemnly for a moment before exploding into laughter, Alina following. They laughed as they made pancakes, chatting in multiple languages at the same time and singing the same songs they used to sing as kids - Amelija would occasionally cast a glance towards the masked man sitting in the corner, but he seemed unbothered by it as he kept his eyes on his book. On the rare occasions he thought she wasn't looking, he'd cast a glance at Alina and the corner of his lips would twitch upwards into a smile.

"I'd say, Alina, you're not as bad at cooking as you used to be", Amelija said, finishing her third pancake. Amelija was the first one to wash her face after the battle, but Alina was smart enough not to tease her anymore. They both still had little specks of flour around their temples that neither wanted to point out.

"As I used to be when? When I was seventeen?"

"Alright, definitely better than when you were seventeen, but I would say living in London had completely ruined your taste. Whenever I visited you I thought you'd completely lost your capacity to enjoy any kind of pleasure in life." she put another bite of jam-filled deliciousness in her mouth. "It's good to see you've loosened up a little." they were still talking in English and even though Erik kept sitting in his armchair and refused to join them for breakfast saying he'd eat later, he was listening as he slowly looked up with interest.

"Really? What made you so miserable in London?" he asked Alina.

"Hmmm", she put down her fork to think. "I don't think I even realized I was miserable back then. I was so eager to get away from everything, I didn't realize how lonely I'd become. I was proud to be living alone and working, and I completely forgot that work isn't everything. I didn't even know I was supposed to enjoy myself."

"I don't think I could just forget to enjoy myself", Amelija frowned.

"That's a good thing, you know."

"And now it's different?" Erik asked quietly at no one in particular.

"Oh, it's different", Amelija turned to him. "Have you not noticed how much she's changed, how much more relaxed she is? Even at first glance, I noticed how she was eating real food, actually wearing her nice dress, and laughing, she even stopped hunching her shoulders. Is that because of you?"

Erik opened his mouth, mortified when Alina took over. "Alright, we all know how you love to make people uncomfortable, but will you please get properly dressed so that I can take you out?"

"Heh. Where are you taking me?" Amelija folded her cutlery and got up with enthusiasm.

"Wherever you want." Alina stood up and started collecting dishes only to be interrupted by a hand taking them from her before she could carry them to the sink.

"I'll do it. I'll be here today. Have fun", Erik said quietly, then waited for Amelija's door to close after her before he smiled and whispered, "Is it really because of me?"

The corners of her eyes wrinkled a bit. "Perhaps."

"You're very cute, but I need an honest answer." he looked at her. "Your life has changed for the better with me?"

"Yes", she whispered back. "Was that not your intention? Or were you secretly trying to make me miserable all along?"

"No, no" he replied. He reached out to run his thumb along her cheek as he seemingly lost his ability to understand humor. "I just didn't think I'd succeed at it." he pulled away as he heard footsteps near the door. "You should go. Your sister will come out now." he could not force himself to act natural or affectionate in front of her, so for the following weeks he would have to get very good at catching precious little seconds of Alina's time alone. He never said it out loud, but Alina followed along flawlessly in this strange, awkward dance.

Alina nodded, passing by to fetch her things from her room as Amelija exited. For a moment, Amelija and Erik looked at one another awkwardly.

"You won't be coming with us?" Amelija asked. Erik could not, for the life of him, figure out if she was asking him to come along or to stay. Her incredible ability to hide her true feelings was very high on the list of things he was starting to resent about her.

"No." he shrugged.

Another terrible moment of silence ensued.

"Do you have some other business?" Amelija tried another futile attempt at small talk.

"Not really." he paused again, thinking whether it was rude to not provide a reason for his absence in this particular case and whether the real reason - I

just really don't want to come - would make it worse.

"You two have a lot of catching up to do. I don't want to bother you", he settled on the most diplomatic answer he could muster.

"That's thoughtful of you", she replied politely. "I'm curious to see where Alina decides to take me."

"I'm sure she'll think of something special. She always does."

As the women left, Erik picked up the plates and, needing something to do with his hands while he was thinking, started washing them. He could finally relax, being alone again; he enjoyed it so immensely as he finished washing and sat down to drink the coffee Alina had left for him on the table. It was the coffee Amelija brought - strong and aromatic, and bitter - it was quite fitting, coming from her.

Erik had no idea what to do about Amelija. Her very presence grated on his nerves, even when she didn't speak, which probably wouldn't be very often. She seemed to be just as chatty as Alina was, but while Alina's rambling and chirping was soothing to him, Amelija's every word made his skin crawl. He didn't know how to explain it - she hadn't said anything wrong, exactly; she had been acting polite and friendly for the past twenty-four hours she was there.

But she disliked him, and he knew it. He'd bet his violin on it. And while Alina claimed it was simply a matter of time and patience, he wasn't so sure. He had indeed decided to be friendlier to her for Alina's sake, but every time he'd tried to say anything in front of her he clammed up instead. He couldn't shake the feeling the little woman was listening to his every word carefully, and for some reason, judging him. He couldn't shake the feeling that every word she said to him was a careful calculation - but unlike Alina, who emanated sincerity beneath it, Amelija emanated nothing.

Some very young version of Erik, buried very deeply, remembered that feeling from long ago. There were many times when people who normally hated him would try for whatever reason to be civil with him, but he could always tell when it was just a pretense. He could pick up on the small hints

in their behavior that they wished he would disappear; one part of him did want to disappear and remove himself from that feeling of being completely unwanted. Contrary to what he had told Alina, there was, in fact, one clear memory Erik had of his birth mother, even after not having seen her for over twenty years - her voice, her face, and her words had all faded away during his life, and it was probably for the better. What he could remember, however, was that feeling of hearing her say one thing, a completely harmless thing - Erik, it's alright, you can come out now - even as hatred flashed out of her eyes. He would come out every time, trusting her instead of his senses, and he would be wrong more often than not.

The last time he heard her say it and obliged, he woke up in chains alone.

Alina would not do this to me. Love doesn't blind her to danger, it never has.

Maybe he should have gone with his original plan and simply disappeared for a few weeks until Amelija left. He couldn't shake the feeling he was in danger.

But that was not the only thing. Another part of him rose in defiance, demanding to be seen. Demanding to prove something, to not just huddle up and fade away.

Erik took a sip of the bitter black coffee as he realized, scowling in disgust at himself, that he wanted to prove to Amelija that he was better than she thought him to be.

I'd rather die than do that, Pride asserted.

That doesn't mean much, because I said that about many other things and still did them later.

He heard a soft, recognizable knock on the door as he finished his coffee and stood up to scoop the sleeping child out of Yana's arms.

"Good morning", she smiled at him. "Are you surviving?"

"Barely", he lowered Piotr gently on the couch. Piotr barely stirred. "How are you?"

"I'll work a little more this week, but then I should have next week free," she said. "But I need to teach the new girls before I leave, or they might make a disaster while I'm gone."

"I once watched as Antoinette taught the new prima ballerina", he remarked.

"And?"

"There are many little things you know when you do something for a long time, and you can't remember how you know them. You forget to tell people about it because it's self-explanatory."

Yana raised her eyebrows. "Oh."

"It's better to let someone watch you as you work than to explain. You'll forget to mention the most important things because they're so important you do them automatically by now."

"Hmm." Yana put her finger over her mouth in thought. "Then I'll have to stay longer today."

"It's better than having to correct their mistakes later. Also, tell them to ask you questions. Don't snap at them when they ask stupid questions."

"I never snap."

"You might because there will be questions and they will be stupid. And you'll get frustrated. But try not to." Erik rubbed his temple a bit. "In my experience, nobody learns as quickly when they're afraid or pressured. Be it cooking or dancing or singing- you know what, I'll tell you about that another time. But don't repeat my mistakes."

"Thank you", Yana beamed at him. "That helps a lot."

Erik took the small metal pot with coffee from the stove and poured some into another cup. "I'm told this is real coffee. Do you want some?"

Yana took the cup from him and drank some, raising her eyebrows. "That.. is real coffee. Wow."

"Alina's sister brought it. She seems to have access to many real and meaningful things", he said with a slight hint of pettiness in his voice.

"I hope that helps her", Yana said innocently.

"With what?"

"With the fact, her sister left her."

Erik blinked.

"Bitter", Yana remarked into her coffee. "And the language is hard to understand."

"I understand it well enough", he murmured to himself. That was not true. He understood Croatian when Alina spoke it because she made an effort to speak clearly. He couldn't make out anything Amelija was saying back to her. Spoken Croatian also included a fair amount of German words, and while Erik could understand some German (he had learned it, among other things, during one of those periods he'd get insufferably bored and decide to change something about his life) the German words in Croatian would get twisted and adapted to fit the grammar and pronunciation of a Slavic language. All he could decipher with his good hearing would be when the language changed, not what they said.

Yana smiled at him. "You know what I mean."

"Well, if she won't make the effort, neither will I. I don't owe her anything."

"Amelija is very small. Smaller than Alina", Yana remarked, seemingly ignoring his offended rambling. "Her shoes have heels. I think she tries to be taller."

"What the hell has that got to do with any of this?"

Yana looked at him, wondering if he was really an idiot or if he was purposefully being difficult. It seemed obvious to her.

"She's not like Alina. If you want her to be, that will only annoy her", Yana said, sipping on her coffee. "You know you can put sugar in this to make it less bitter?"

"That's how they made it, so I left it that way."

"You have your own hands", she said. "If it's too bitter, make it sweet. Better than resenting her for bringing bitter coffee."

"But-"

"You have your own hands, Erik", Yana repeated, looking at him sternly.

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"Good afternoon", Alina burst into Yana's workplace after a long day of sightseeing as she usually did, loudly and noticeably, winking at the kids who waited for their ice cream. Amelija followed gracefully behind her.

"Is Yana here?"

There was another girl named Yana currently in the shop, but she didn't even flinch, used to the scene playing out before her.

"Yana's shift will be over in half an hour, miss", said Polina, the plump little rosy-cheeked girl who worked as a waitress. "Would you like to order?"

"Lemonade, please. That's a fairly long shift", Alina commented as she sat down, Amelija settling across from her.

"She's been promoted to supervise the younger bakers, miss."

"Oh, that's splendid", Alina beamed. "What are you having, Amelija?"

"Hmmm", Amelija looked around. "Lemonade, yes, and... surprise me with the cake. I'll trust in your judgment."

"Uh, alright", Polina blushed and hurried off.

"Cute girl", Amelija remarked. "Now, where were we?"

"You were going to tell me how exactly you managed to get mama to let you out so late", Alina crossed her arms. "She never suspected what you were doing?"

"No, how would she? Do you think Laszlo would knock on our door, asking for my hand in marriage? Don't be ridiculous."

"Who covered you?" Alina narrowed her eyes.

"Everyone", Amelija smiled proudly. "Nikola, Jelka, Pavle, even Danica once. They were incredible."

"Hmph. You're very good at this. You know, you're old enough that you could have just told her and she'd have no way of stopping you. Nobody can forbid you from partying or seeing someone if you're an adult."

"Was that a conversation worth having, though?" Amelija smiled sweetly at Polina who was currently putting on her table the biggest piece of cake Alina had seen her cut for anyone. "Thank you, miss. I'm sure it will be delicious", Amelija remarked.

Polina smiled, blushing violently again, and excused herself. The sisters remained seated for another half hour, waiting for Yana to go home together, and the little waitress thought she could see Amelija smiling at her under long eyelashes.

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After dinner, which Erik missed under the excuse that "Piotr wanted to go outside", the three women settled down chatting and drinking the strong drink Amelija had brought with her from across the sea.

"Do you know how to play briscola?" Amelija asked Yana, shuffling the cards.

"Yes."

"Can we play without a fourth person?" Alina asked.

"Yes, of course, I'll figure it out", Amelija said. She had always been good at these things - she could take any game and alter the rules to her current situation while making it still playable. "Of course, you could play with us", she nodded at Erik sitting across the table. "I'm willing to bet you're good at bluffing, and Alina could use some help." it was a conscious poke at him, trying to see if he would play along or get offended, but he didn't react at all.

"No, thank you", he replied stiffly.

"Alina will lose, then", Amelija grinned. "She is terrible when she has to play against other people."

"I'm good at playing with other people", Alina grumbled. "Maybe some of us are more suited for cooperation than competition."

"You're so incredibly boring, you know that? I'm honestly ashamed of you."

While women chatted, Piotr looked up from his drawing at the colorful cards in Amelija's hands and realized they piqued his interest. He walked over to Erik, poking his arm until he got his attention.

"Pick me up", Piotr demanded, reaching his arms out to Erik.

Erik looked at him silently.

"Pick me up, please", Piotr rolled his eyes impatiently.

"Yes, sir", Erik said, picking him up gently to put him on his lap. Piotr squirmed a bit before settling down and looking at the women playing cards. Erik smiled, ruffling the boy's soft hair for a bit.

"That looks boring", Piotr asserted.

"It does?" Erik asked.

"They're just looking at cards and throwing them", Piotr explained. "You just have to throw the right card. No thanks."

"It's not about the cards", Erik said. "It's about, uh, them."

"Huh?"

"They try to figure out which card is the right one by looking at each other and their behavior", he said. "There's also strategy to it."

"Do you like that game?"

"Hm. Sometimes."

"I don't", Piotr decided.

"That's fine", Erik smiled. "There are other games. We'll play something else later."

Amelija listened to them talk, considerably surprised by the exchange.

"Which games do you like?" she asked curiously.

Piotr shrugged. His games didn't have a name. He turned to Erik, waiting for him to explain it to the strange lady.

"You won't tell her yourself?" He asked. Piotr was growing shyer as he grew older - he still acted the same around people he knew well, but now he would sometimes feel uneasy when asked questions he couldn't answer or put in situations he didn't understand. Piotr nudged him lightly.

Erik could understand the wariness Piotr felt around strangers, and unlike Alina and Yana, didn't have the heart to push him into talking.

"He doesn't like competing. Most of his games are... more fantasy and fairytale than play", he explained, looking into Amelija's eyes. It unnerved him how much she looked like Alina - and how cold her eyes were, unlike the ones he was used to.

"He likes to play pretend?" Amelija chuckled. "That's understandable. Many adults never get out of that phase either."

He bowed his head to her, "many, yes. Though they turn it into other games."

Amelija smiled at him sweetly, turning back to her cards. Alina shot them both a look but decided to say nothing for now.

"I'm bored," Piotr announced, turning to Erik again.

"Right. Perhaps you just need to look at things from a different perspective", he replied, standing up as he grabbed Piotr around his waist and swung him lightly upside-down. Piotr screamed with delight, and Amelija saw a jolt of shock course through Erik's body as his arms spasmed and his fingers clenched at the sound - it lasted for a second before he composed himself. He stopped and looked at the boy seriously.

"Softer, Piotr", he merely said, in the same quiet voice. "We've talked about this."

"Sorry", Piotr replied quietly, grinning apologetically as he covered his cheeks with his hands. "Swing me again!"

With Erik turned away and distracted, Yana cast a glance at Amelija and whispered in some mix of Croatian and Russian, "You can't talk to him like that."

Alina kept silent and focused on the cards, but Amelija looked up at Yana in surprise.

"Are you talking to me or?"

"Yes."

"About Piotr?"

"No, not Piotr." Yana kept her gaze on her cards. Erik had good hearing; he'd turn around if he heard his name in any language.

"What, exactly, have I done wrong?" Amelija asked.

"You will mess up his head. He knows you don't like him, but you keep pretending and saying things with double meanings. He doesn't trust strangers. You shouldn't mess with him like that."

Amelija raised her eyebrows, feeling irritated at that quiet scolding. "He seems to be handling it fairly well, and doing the same."

"Yes. He can do it forever. But it won't make him your friend", Yana replied flatly as she looked at her cards.

"And what do you want me to do?" Alina frowned at her.

"Nothing. This is not my problem. But you want to prove you're better than him, and he wants to prove you're not. And that's annoying to me." Amelija stared in shock at the quiet girl's apparent lack of shame at minding everyone else's business when Yana looked up once again and switched seamlessly to English. "Erik put him down right now or I will -"

Erik gently and obediently lowered Piotr, whom he was until now held by his ankles, down on the couch. "Don't blame me, little man. Your mother hates fun."

When Amelija looked at the couch again, Piotr was already sleeping soundly with his head resting on Erik's leg; Erik seemed completely unbothered by it as he was reading his book and only occasionally looked down and reached to ruffle Piotr's hair. Amelija looked at him, a decision finally forming in her head. She waited for Yana to pick up Piotr and leave, and asked Alina to go to bed without her, as she wanted to stay awake a little longer. After Alina left, Erik waited what he thought was a polite amount of time (it wasn't, it was only a few minutes) and closed his book, announcing he was going to bed as well.

"My mother sent something for you as well", Amelija said quietly.

He stopped in his tracks and looked at her, but his expression remained completely undecipherable under the mask.

Amelija stood up and rummaged through the pockets of her suitcase, taking out a small package.

"Alina wrote to me about you," she said unsurely. "She said you were a musician."

"What else did she say?" he tilted his head slightly as they both sat back down.

"You know, I don't remember it all, as it was mostly just infatuated rambling. But she seems to think your eyes are "enchanting" if I translated that to English correctly."

Erik blinked in surprise. "What was the word she used?"

"In Croatian? "Očaravajuće", if that means anything. But if you tell her I told you, she'll end me, so don't." She frowned a little. "Do you know Croatian?"

"I understand a little. I don't speak it." he could speak it a little bit as well but had no intention of uttering a single word of Croatian in front of Amelija, ever.

"Ah." terrifying. Amelija tried to remember for a split second if she said anything to Alina in his presence that he wasn't supposed to hear - she couldn't remember anything, thankfully. She held the neatly wrapped box in her hand. "In any case. This is for you."

Erik took the box from her and looked at it for a few seconds as Amelija sat across from him again. He then looked at her again.

"You can open it now," she clarified.

He unwrapped the package slowly without ripping the paper, then opened the box and equally slowly took out the soft filling that prevented the contents from breaking. The first thing he took out was the cufflinks.

He took them in his hand very slowly and carefully, observing them as his long fingers turned them over gently. They were made of two little round pieces of amber set in silver frames, with silver clasps to fasten them to the sleeves of a shirt.

"They're from our father", Amelija remarked. "You can wear them to concerts or something like that." The cufflinks were her least favorite of the bunch - her father wasn't the one to give personal or emotional presents, but he was very good at conveying messages he intended to convey. The cufflinks were simple, elegant, and masterfully made, and carried with them the implication that Amelija's father took Erik for the kind of gentleman who would have use of something so classy. She thought it unnecessarily snobby - Alina will be so annoyed when she sees them - but looking at Erik now, she had to admit it struck the right chord.

He looked at Amelija again, then put them down wordlessly. He reached into the box again.

The next thing he took out was a simple palm-sized wooden flute, not lacquered but carved with little leaves and flowers. "It's a traditional Croatian flute", Amelija said. "Furla. This one is very small, but the tone is very soft, and mom thought you might like it." Erik traced the carvings with his finger. It was a much less expensive gift, but the message was much more personal.

He looked at Amelija again for a few seconds - she was getting annoyed already - and, after some hesitation, put the flute on his lips and blew into it. It produced a soft, wooden sound; he played a few notes before putting it down again next to the cufflinks. Amelija had a passing thought it sounded a little too lovely for someone just blowing in it for the first time.

The last thing he took out of the box was a simple black fountain pen, inlaid with a bright blue-green strip made of some kind of nacre. The strip was

iridescent and changed color between green, blue, and purple as he turned it over.

"Abalone shell. From the Adriatic sea," she explained. "They're rather popular. Mama said nacre was more appropriate for jewelry, but I thought you might like it. I thought you might use it for compositions, or drawings."

He held the pen in his fingers as if it were made of incredibly thin glass. "This one is from you, then?" he asked quietly.

"So to speak," Amelija shrugged.

"Why?" he asked, even quieter, barely above a whisper.

I don't know. Did I want to make my present something beautiful without an agenda for a change? Amelija didn't know what to say; this was so far removed from any normal reaction to gifts she'd ever seen. "Isn't it customary when you visit someone to bring thank-you gifts to your hosts?" she asked. Truth be told, the gifts had a double purpose - if Amelija judged that Alina was really happy, they would serve as sort of welcome gifts to welcome him into their family, as they would probably get no other chance to give them. She didn't want to tell him that just yet.

"I don't know", he said. "I'm not well-versed in etiquette."

Really? I couldn't tell. "It is where I come from. We always did it whenever we visited our family or friends. It was my mother who said we should get something for you, and she knows all about these things."

"Mhm." He looked at the presents again, then back at her. "These are very beautiful. I've never had anything like this before. Thank you." He held up the fountain pen. "You were right. I do like it."

Amelija was used to the flowery language and over-dramatic reactions to gifts - it was a big part of her family and culture - but this was something else. He had barely said anything, but he looked at the presents as if he wasn't sure if they were the most beautiful things he'd ever seen, or if maybe they had a hidden razorblade planted in them. Erik must have

realized how awkward and stiff he was acting as well, and after another second of silent hesitation he took off his own, plain metal cufflinks from the sleeves of his shirt - Amelija could see a pale flash of a jagged scar on his wrist, only for a split second as the sleeve opened a little - and switched them with the amber ones.

"They're very dramatic", he smiled to himself.

"They fit you", Amelija smiled back.

"I'm beginning to think I'm too easily bought with shiny things", he mumbled to himself.

"And the flute? You can try playing it."

"The flute is wonderful. But I'd like to get to know it a little better before I play it in front of someone." He bowed his head slightly at Amelija, a gesture she was starting to understand. Erik felt a tad guilty - it was a lie; he could probably play it well enough - he'd seen and tried out enough flutes back in Paris. But he didn't want to play it in front of her yet.

"I have to go now," he stood up, putting the flute and the pen back into the box very, very carefully. "Thank you. And thank your family."

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Dear Antoinette,

I hope you're doing well. Everything's fine here - well, I'm losing my mind over mundane things, but when am I not? Alina's sister arrived, and she's more-or-less exactly as I had imagined her. I don't like that she's here, but Alina has been so blindingly happy since she arrived that I cannot help but go along with it. I understand that she's used to having a big family, and I am only one man - I can't blame her for wanting more than I can solely give her.

Well, I can, but after some thinking, I've decided not to.

Speaking of family, I'm facing some troubles with my citizenship. We never had a plan for that part, and I won't bother you with it, because I've bothered you enough. I was originally going to be alright with simply existing completely incognito and in mutual ignorance of the world. However, a chance has opened for me to

[one entire row of scratched-out words]

As it turns out, Jack has found an opportunity for me to work, as a musician, that is. There's a small, recently-opened concert hall that performs shorter works by unknown musicians - it's not a very profitable endeavor, but I'm told they make money by hosting performances for the Conservatory and various other musical schools. It still sounds absurd, but yes, I could get a chance to send my compositions and see what happens. Truth be told I haven't done anything to pursue that ambition yet, but you can hold your judgemental looks for now, because I will.

Meanwhile, I'd like to fill out the damned paperwork and be naturalized, but I'm lacking any goddamn proof of my existence save for my physical presence - I don't remember when or where I was born, I don't remember if I was baptized, I have no blood relations to witness for me and I don't even have a last name. I might as well have been born yesterday, or not at all. Funnily enough, having no history automatically leads people to assume you have a history you want to hide, and it's not doing me any favors. I didn't think it would bother me this much, but it does.

But, as I've said, you needn't bother with it. I'll figure something out.

Erik.

My dear Erik,

I understand you're having some troubles with the more mundane aspects of being fully accepted into society; I don't envy you for all the paperwork and procedure that awaits you before you become a full citizen. By the time this letter reaches you, maybe you'll have found a solution already. But, truthfully, I would have preferred if you'd asked me outright instead of having to read your letter three times before I understood what you wanted

from me. If the problem of family names bothers you that much, you can simply take mine. Did you think I'd refuse? If you need to write down relatives to witness for you, you can put me, of course, and Lucien - any short search will confirm that he indeed existed, and I doubt they'll go so far as to check if he still does. I've written down what I know of his family tree so you can, hopefully, find a spot for yourself.

Next time you happen to forget you're my son in every way that matters, I will be gravely offended. Your shyness is more than a little charming, but please, no more tiptoeing around family. You're getting too old for this nonsense.

With love,

Antoinette.

Chapter 27:The More People Know About Me, The More I Want To Disappear

It was rather immature to avoid Amelija after the previous night, Erik knew. He did it anyway, but he knew by the nagging voice in his head - Antoinette's voice - that it was a rude, immature thing to do to avoid her for that day after she went out of his way to befriend him. It would have been much better if he had stayed home on this warm and sleepy morning if he played with Alina's hair until she woke up and then joined her and her sister for breakfast. It would have been better and less selfish than marauding around the cliffs and listening to the crashing waves.

He did it anyway.
And he didn't regret it even though he felt slightly guilty. Sitting on one of the more hard-to-reach cliffs he took out the delicate little flute Alina's mother sent him across the ocean and looked at it again in the light of day. It was quite lovely - a simple piece of discreetly carved and decorated wood. He brought it up to his mouth to try playing it as he thought about what he should do.
Until now he did not give a single damn about Alina's family; he had no desire to meet them and frankly saw them as figures in the background that might one day try and take her from him. He resented them for how lonely and out-of-place Alina seemed to feel back home, knowing very well how that felt. If he could have opted out of this whole situation and simply taken her somewhere even further where they couldn't send anyone to find them, he'd be seriously tempted. If he could have disappeared until Amelija was gone without Alina having that unbearably disappointed look in her eyes -

Ah, best not to torture me with things too good to happen. I'm stuck.
And he was going to lose his mind for sure.
His very limited capacity for people he could stand regularly was already stretched thin, and those people were carefully picked as trustworthy and comforting. He handpicked and tested every one of the people he considered friends, knowing that it was easier than expected to genuinely care about them.
Being thrown into a melting pot of strange, difficult, temperamental people he'd never met but was suddenly connected to was the last thing he wanted, and he honestly never expected it - how was he supposed to know they'd start treating him like family? He correctly guessed that Amelija's visit was a sort of check on him personally; but he never expected anything to happen if he passed it, only a disaster in waiting if he failed.
Well, he hadn't failed so far, judging by how much she tried to get along with him even though he annoyed the life out of her.
That makes both of us.
This flute makes such a sweet, soft sound. I feel like I'm playing lullabies for birds and deer in some flowery meadow.
Fine, you two-faced, annoying little wench. I'll be your friend. I just don't know how.
It was impossible to figure out how people like Amelija expected him to act because he'd never spent much time among civilized society and well-raised individuals. While reading a book of rules and etiquette was easy, he was smart enough to know reacting on the spot to a certain situation was supposed to be quick and spontaneous - he couldn't just start acting the right way without practice, and he won't be getting practice anytime soon. He could only act like himself and hope for the best. Except he detested that idea so much he rather said and did as little as possible, melting away into the background like a shadow.
Background shadows cannot make terrible mistakes.
Ah, but ghosts can, can't they? At least one of them can. It seems no matter how much he hides, the worst things remain visible.
He put the flute down, now considerably annoyed.
Who cares if you say or do something stupid and rude by accident? Are you trying to convince yourself that's what you're afraid of - being rude or offending her? Do you think it would matter at all? Since when is that sort of trivial nonsense important to you?

Other people's feelings are not trivial nonsense.
Well, who cares if she gets offended by something minor? She's bound to get much worse than offended if she finds out who and what you are. You won't hide the rot behind kind words and niceties; she's too smart not to notice it. Alina noticed it right away, she just didn't care for whatever reason. It's right there, on your he-
That was enough. Whatever conclusion or epiphany he was hoping to achieve here, he was now farther from it than when he started. He stood up furiously and hopped off the cliff, deciding he might benefit from someone who would put an end to his nonsense, since he was unable to do it himself.

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It was more of rapping than a knock at the door - tappy-tap tap - quiet and shy; Amelija, immersed in her thoughts, almost didn't hear it.
"Amelija, can you get that for me?" Alina said over her shoulder, gently stirring the pot of stuffed peppers on the stove. "I'm somewhat occupied."

Amelija stood up obediently and walked over to the door. "Are you expecting someone?"
"No, but open anyway. Could be urgent."
Amelija opened the door, frowning at nothing for a moment before she thought to cast her glance down. In front of her was a short, slightly messy-looking boy with very distinct blue eyes on an otherwise plain face. He frowned back at her, mimicking her confusion.
"Yes?" she asked.
"I'm looking for Miss Boričević. Is she here?"
"Yes, I'm here," Amelija answered automatically without thinking.
"I need a specific one, and you're not her", he replied with raised eyebrows. "Are there any more of you here?"
Amelija narrowed her eyes at him. "Alina, this clever young man wants to see you."
Alina's head finally turned to the door. "Walter!"
"Good day, Miss", Walter replied, his expression suddenly becoming a lot less hostile. He tipped his hat and half-smiled at her shyly. "Sorry if I'm bothering you. I'm returning your book." he held out the book towards Alina

disregarding Amelija in front of him, still standing in the doorway.
"Walter, for goodness' sake, what is that nonsense? Come in already!" Alina laughed, putting her arm around his shoulders and leading him inside.
"You're not bothering me at all I'm glad you decided to visit over the summer. This is my sister, Amelija. Amelija, this is Walter, one of my best students."
Amelija smiled at the boy, wondering what the rest of them were like if this rude brat was one of the best.
"I'm not", Walter grinned at her. "I'm terrible."
Alina laughed. "You won't lose the crown off your head if you accept a single compliment for once. How have you been?"
"Eh, I'm alright." Walter shrugged, sitting on the chair she drew out for him. "Went fishing yesterday.
"What did you catch?"
"Fish." Walter raised his eyebrows at Alina, in the same manner, he had at Amelija, but his eyes were twinkling with friendly humor instead of hostility. "No idea what kind it was, I don't care about fishing. I just like to watch Hank and Sam lose their minds, fighting over bait and finding the best spot."
"And how was the book?" Alina asked, bringing Walter a fresh glass of lemonade before sitting across from him. "Was it too difficult? It's objectively quite difficult."

Amelija cast a look at the book in question - it was a textbook with the title Geometry written on the front. She took it with interest - it seemed to be written for students a few years older than Walter.

"Nah, I mean, reading it was a bore, so I didn't exactly read everything", Walter shifted in his seat nervously. "I mostly solved the problems, that was fun."
"How did you know how to solve the problems without reading them?" Alina asked him, slightly confused.
"Well, I would read some parts if I really couldn't figure it out", Walter scratched his head. "Mostly I looked at the examples and solutions, then did the same with the exercises. It wasn't that hard. I checked in the solutions later, it was mostly right."
Alina blinked.

"Yeah, okay, I know I said I'd practice reading", Walter hurried, "but this was just so boring. They explain every single step of every problem. I couldn't stand it. I'll read something interesting instead, can I do that?"
Alina's face beamed as her mouth spread into a huge smile. She gripped the edges of the table in excitement; her eyes twinkled with joy. "Walter, you're a genius! Great job! I can't believe you figured it out on your own, that's brilliant!"
"These are not that easy", Amelija remarked with her nose in the book. Well, they were easy enough for her, but she couldn't tell how hard they would be for a child - especially with no adults around to help. The boy looked to be twelve or thirteen, although it was hard to tell. Could it be that he lied about reading it? She wondered. But then again, there were notes on the margins, and Amelija was quite certain no adult would have made them, not with that handwriting.
"I'm not sure what to teach you anymore", Alina laughed. "You can just teach yourself everything!"
"But I won't", Walter replied. "Not the boring stuff. I have standards."
"Obviously", Alina threw her hands in the air in mock annoyance. "Alright, well, great job. I'll think of something new to give you in a few days, meanwhile, you might as well enjoy your summer outside. Your brain might boil if you over-strain it."
"Just a second", Amelija lowered the book. "Walter, is it? Can I ask you something?"
"Yeaaaah?" Walter drawled with slight suspicion.
"Let's say you have a circle- alright, let's not be boring, let's have a cake", Amelija said, her finger drawing a circle on the table. "If you know the diameter of the cake is, let's say... do you use inches or centim- never mind, let's use inches. Ten inches is the diameter. Would you be able to tell me the surface area of the circle?"
"Yeah, that's easy", Walter puffed. "The surface area has that one formula. Radius squared, multiplied by pi. That would be... three hundred and fourteen square inches. No, wait", he said as Amelija opened her mouth to correct him. "That's too much for just one cake. The diameter is ten, then the radius is five. Okay. Five squared is twenty-five, times pi... Can I have a pencil?"
"No need", Amelija said. "Twenty-five times pi, square inches, is close enough. Say, if I asked you to calculate the surface of one slice, could you

do it?"
"Yeah. How many slices are there?"
"Not so fast", Amelija waved her finger. "That would be too easy. I can't tell you how many slices there are, but I can tell you that the central angle, whatever you people call it, where the slice connects to the rest of the cake, is twenty degrees. Could you then do it?"
"Yea, but then I still need a pencil and paper." Walt shrugged.
"Really", Amelija crossed her arms, smiling with interest. "Do you know the formula for the surface of a circle's sector?"
"No", Walter frowned. "Why would I memorize every single formula?"

"It's right here", she pointed at the page of the book with something scribbled on the margins. "Did you write this?"
"I did", Walter replied. "But you don't need to know it by heart. You can just derive it from the other formula if needed because the proportion of the angle to the whole circle is the same as the proportion of the surfaces. So the book said. That's how I do it."
Amelija blinked, paying little mind to Alina who winked proudly at Walter next to her. "Alright, I think it's time I give you a pencil and paper because I want to see this."

ooo

"Hello, Jack", Erik said in a recognizably flat tone that told Jack everything he needed to know as he opened the door cheerfully. "Am I bothering you?"
"Not at all, not at all." Jack smiled sincerely and gestured for him to come inside. Whatever Erik needed, he knew already he wouldn't say it out on the street. "Please, come in."
"Thank you."
As Erik entered and Jack closed the door behind him, Jack coughed and said, "Actually, I have to warn you I'm not alone. I have a guest who came this morning, but-"
"You should've said so. I'll just go", Erik moved towards the door, but Jack stopped him.
"Listen to me. I have a guest who might be very interesting to you for reasons you'll immediately understand. If you want to, you can leave, but it'll just take a few minutes of your time."

Erik blinked. "What?"
"Can you, please, just for once do as I ask and ask questions later?"
Erik shrugged. "I could."
"Thank you kindly." Jack gave him a playful eye roll as he opened the door and led him to his living room. "Erik, this is Fritz Heidel, my friend since long ago. Fritz, this is Erik, my friend since recently."
The man sitting in Jack's armchair was somewhat stocky and had slightly messy, salt-and-pepper hair. His square face was framed by a pair of prominent eyebrows, which were now raised slightly in surprise; this was unnerving as his overall appearance gave the impression of someone who generally didn't get surprised easily.
The introduction was redundant from Erik's point. Erik knew very well who Fritz Heidel was.
He knew about him the same way he knew about most things happening in New York - through reading the news and shameless eavesdropping. He'd seen Heidel before and he'd heard people talk about him, and seeing as he thought it might potentially be relevant to him in the future, he paid attention.
Was, Heidel a conductor?
Not just any conductor, either - he conducted concerts for the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, as well as holding a professor's chair in the Conservatory. It was a respectable position, one that seemed in Heidel's case well-deserved - the man was seemingly the embodiment of several centuries worth of tradition in search for artistic perfection. Erik had attended both his concerts and his lectures last Spring, always sneaking in secretly and leaving before anyone noticed him, and he had to admit that his concerts - solemn, serious, and dignified - were always marked by absolute excellence from all parties involved. Heidel was more an institution than a man and one that not many were invited to attend. As closely as he seemed to pay attention to all his students and subordinates, it was fair to assume that Heidel nevertheless never noticed him there, and the expression on the man's face suggested he was right.
Erik stood there, starstruck and horrified, as Heidel blinked a little in confusion. Jack closed the door and walked over to his usual armchair, and that seemed to snap Heidel out of his trance - he stood up and offered Erik his hand, nodding and muttering something similar to "nice to meet you". Erik, on his part, took his hand but said nothing and simply kept staring at

him. He looks so normal up close, he thought. And so much smaller.
"Erik", Jack coughed, "Would you like to sit?"
Erik suddenly realized he was still towering over them, then sat down as quickly as humanly possible in very obvious embarrassment. He could hear Jack offering him something to drink from what seemed a very long distance, but refused it. He had a feeling it would significantly raise his chances of embarrassing himself further. He forced himself to look at Jack but he refused, even if he had a strong need to keep his eyes on Heidel like prey looking in terror at its stalking predator.
Although, to be fair, while Heidel seemed to be slightly uncomfortable himself and at a loss for what to say, he didn't seem particularly disgusted at the sight of him. Erik scratched slightly at the ties of his mask in a nervous tick, reminding himself it was still in place.
"Well", Jack said with his usual outward cheer and charm as he died inside at the sight of Erik's conversational incompetence, "this is strange. You two have more in common with each other than with me. I'm giving it five minutes before you start yapping about music or whatever and ditch me entirely. Fritz, I want you to remember I was the one who first introduced you to this very, very talented young man."
"Oh", Heidel said with mild interest. "You're a musician?"
"I-" Erik stuttered. "Sometimes?"
"Sometimes?" Heidel raised his eyebrows at him in an arrogant gesture Erik imagined having terrified generations and generations of Conservatory students over the years. "In my line of work, you either are, or you aren't one. What do you do?"
"I-" he almost told him, he wanted so badly to tell him and let him know he agreed with him but it was already too late to correct himself, and well, maybe you should scramble for his validation like some teenage fool, that'll impress him - "I, uh, I just want to say I've seen you conduct Dvorak's Requiem this Spring. I- I was surprised to see something so new, from Europe, come all the way here - I liked how - I liked how heavy it sounded. It- is- it was so heavy and dark, and I liked that you went with that, instead of trying to mellow it down and make it more palatable." He blurted it all out in one breath, his eyes darting around the room, then closed his mouth and looked at his hands. Oh, how brave! How eloquently you used to criticize people around you when they weren't up to your standards, whispering from the shadows and pulling at their insecurities! Were you

always this cowardly underneath? Is it because you actually respect this man, or just because he can see you?

Heidel looked at him a little less sternly, then laughed. "Well, what would have been the point of it? It's a funeral mass. If people pay to hear me conduct a funeral mass, they're going to leave feeling as if they died. They can only blame themselves; it was right there in the title."

"Yes", Erik muttered at his knuckles. "Yes, it was exactly what I was hoping for."
"Well, sir, you do know me then, but I don't know you", Heidel reclined in his armchair, intertwining his fingers in his lap with an air of languid confidence. "What did you say you do, again?"
"I didn't say", Erik admitted as Jack shot him a very venomous glare across the room. "I- I- that is, I mean, I am not a professional musician." he looked back at Jack with hot, embarrassed fury, because he knew even if Heidel might lose interest and hopefully drop the subject now, Jack would sure as all hell not let it go so easily -
"No, not professional, but only because he isn't making money from it yet", Jack laughed, "But I'm willing to bet not even you, Fritz, would be able to tell as much if you heard him."
"Heard what?" Heidel raised his hands in amused confusion; he couldn't tell what was going on exactly, but after all these years he could recognize stage fright when he saw it. "Not that I don't believe you, Jack, but heard what exactly? Maybe I've already heard it, I just don't know it yet."
"No", Erik whispered, "You haven't."
Heidel looked like he wanted to tease him some more but then decided against it. Instead, he kept silent for a moment as he sipped his drink and studied Erik carefully.
"Oh, I'm getting hungry. I'll get us something to last us until dinner, maybe some crackers", Jack announced, getting up. "Erik, could you come along and help me?"
"Right", Erik stood up abruptly and followed Jack into the small kitchen, where as soon as the door closed he was met with another annoying glare.
"What the hell is wrong with you?" Jack whispered through his teeth. "Why can't you be civil for five goddamn minutes? Fritz is - "
"Did you set this up?" Erik asked quietly, with a very slow and restrained

tone in his voice that made Jack pause slightly. "I'm not in the mood to be thrown directly into the fire. I have things on my mind."
"No?" Jack frowned. "How could I have known you'd come today? No, Fritz is my friend, and he came to visit me. Which would be a remarkably beneficial coincidence for you", he pointed an angry finger at Erik, "If you could behave for, I don't know, a second or two and talk to him like an adult! Are you suddenly some kid who just learned Twinkle, twinkle little star on the piano? Get a hold of yourself! Don't pretend like you don't have an entire symphony in your jacket pocket!"
"I don't." Erik crossed his arms defiantly, wondering how Jack knew that and whether it was that obvious or Alina simply told him.
Jack rolled his eyes.
"It's just one movement", Erik mumbled, looking away.
"Well, whatever that means it's beside the point -"
"I haven't finished it", Erik interrupted. "And, besides, what do you want me to do? Beg him to take a look at it while he's on his day off having a drink with you. You want me to crawl for his attention? How pathetic do youth- "
"What?" Jack snarled. "I don't give a damn what exactly you do! Fritz has connections, and you'd be stupid or insane or both not to at least let him know you're a musician looking for work if you're already so incredibly shy you can't talk to him like a normal person about a shared passion! What, do you think you're secretly so terrible at it that he'll laugh at you? Are you so fragile that -" he trailed off, eyes widening as he looked at Erik, who still fumed silently with his arms crossed. "Oh."
"Say another word and that'll be the last time we speak", he said, in that same flat tone that meant nothing good.
Jack nodded slowly, suddenly serious. A moment passed in silence.
"Could you, please, take this bowl of crackers to the living room?" Jack asked. Erik took the bowl obediently, and Jack pretended not to notice the ever-so-slight twitch of his fingers.
"Fritz is a good guy", Jack said after Erik turned to exit the room. "I mean, he's a bit full of himself, but he's not such a snob. He's good to his colleagues."
Erik studied the bowl in his hands. "I know. I've seen him teach." that will make it worse if he hates me, he would have maybe added in a million years on a good day. He didn't know if he was going to sit down again or

just keep walking out of the house until he lowered the small bowl on the table and felt his knees buckling to sit down against his will. Heidel thanked him politely and helped himself to some crackers, pretending to be blissfully unaware of the drama that was going on.
"I play violin", Erik forced out, the word fragile still echoing mockingly in his skull. "I've tried other things, but I suppose I always come back to it. I have no formal education, only what I could pick up from books and looking at other people. A few years ago, I started composing."
"I see", Heidel said in a very carefree tone. "It takes a lot to learn violin all by yourself."
"Well, I am somewhat pathologically persistent." maniacally obsessive would probably have been more accurate.
"Are you good at it?" Heidel raised his eyebrows at him again, like a professor challenging his students on the final exam.
"I'd say I'm good at playing the violin", Erik said, still faking confidence through sheer spite, "but I can't say much about my compositions. They're different, that much I'm certain of."
"Ah", Heidel smiled at him somewhat smugly; he did always like students who had a little backbone. "How are they different?"
"I don't exactly know. I've never performed for an audience." unless my lover counts? She likes them, would you like her recommendation? She's very good at talking, unlike me, perhaps she can explain.
"That sounds intriguing", Heidel replied. "If you ever do perform for an audience, I just might find myself in it. I do sometimes enjoy different music."
"I could save you the trouble", Erik said, still flying on wings of spite as his mind kept screaming in the background, "I could show you an example of it, and if it's not to your liking you don't have to waste your time." he promptly took the neatly folded bunch of papers out of his jacket pocket, smoothed them out and laid them with pretend nonchalance out on the table. Heidel looked highly amused with the whole show, and Erik felt intoxicated with a sort of defiant pride as he leaned back. For a second he even thought it wouldn't matter what the man said - he liked his compositions, he actually showed them to him, and that would be victory enough.
That sense of confidence lasted for a whole proud minute and deflated as soon as Heidel put down his glass and picked up the papers, now with

genuine interest and curiosity. Smugness and irony left Heidel's face as Jack finally entered the room again and sat down, giving Erik another glare - this one something between pride and annoyance.
Panic kicked in as Heidel read page after page in complete silence, sometimes smiling, sometimes frowning. Erik almost stood up and left a thousand times by the time he finished and finally looked up at him, serious. "You wrote this, then?"
"I did", he replied.
"I... I see", Heidel looked through the papers again, seemingly unsure what to say.
"If I may ask, why do you suddenly switch to E minor on this part of the page?" Heidel held up the page he was reading, holding it with noticeably more care than before.
"I- because the mood changes", Erik said, his ears burning from how idiotic he sounded to himself. He couldn't remember why he did it that way - he just wrote it down long ago and then glossed over that part.
"I see that, yes, I was just wondering if this might be done more smoothly if you just - over here, you tone it down to pianissimo and put a pause here for the violins, then they might start the new theme quietly as everything goes into crescendo again - what do you think?"
"I think - I think that would be better", Erik said, nearly paralyzed with embarrassment.
"There are a few more things I'd like to discuss - technical things, but overall - is this your first independent composing work?"
"I- the first finished one, so to speak, yes."
"Well, that's fantastic", Heidel said seriously, waving Erik's notes in the air. "This is some of the most creative, imaginative, inspired work I've ever heard, and I don't say this lightly. It just needs some polishing before it's ready to be performed - I am, in all honesty, impressed."
Erik nodded staring at the paper where Heidel pointed, his head spinning with the intensity of what the man was saying - it was too much for him to make sense of it at once; the compliments were more than he ever imagined - but what was that about polishing? A piece of music is either good or it isn't, he thought; either it makes you dream or it doesn't. Does that mean this doesn't? Would Heidel lie? It doesn't seem like he would bother lying. He tried hard to put everything he said in its respective box - good, but also needs work, but also good. Alright. I suppose in some other person's head

those two might coexist - ah, this is probably why I was such a horrible music teacher.
Heidel was growing impatient with the young man staring intently at the paper in his hand.
"Well, then?" he asked.
"I would like it to remain as it is", Erik admitted quietly.
"In that case, I'll be honest with you", Heidel returned the papers to him. "Some parts are rather raw. I can appreciate what you were going for, but the audience - and the performers - might not. I can understand not wanting to sacrifice your artistic freedom, but - it won't hurt to try. If you're interested, I could offer some help. Once the work is finished, you'd be able to find an orchestra a lot easier if you tweak it just a little too New York's, ah, artistic sensibilities."
Erik was looking at him with pure fury now, and the next thing he would've said would probably have been extremely imprudent had Jack not started talking before he could even open his mouth.
"Fritz, but I think you're being a bit harsh", he laughed. "You're criticizing his first child, and that's never easy to hear. I think anyone in Erik's position would prefer to think about it first before he decides anything. Don't you think so?"
"Of course, of course, I wasn't going to get a pencil and start crossing out parts right away", Heidel laughed. "I don't think of myself so highly yet."
"That's good to know", Erik said quietly in a tone that only slightly resembled hissing.
"Neither does Erik", Jack looked at him with murder in his eyes. "And he certainly doesn't think so highly of himself to disregard in advance the advice of someone with your level of education and influence."
The three of them smiled at each other in silence for a second as Jack poured himself a second glass of whiskey, thinking about whether he should maybe give Erik a bill for all the alcohol he consumed to put up with him lately.
"Thank you for your advice", Erik said, bowing his head very slightly while looking down at the table. "Honestly. It... it makes sense, what you're saying. I'd just like to think about it."

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Alina opened the door and rushed out without looking as she usually did to once again collide head-on with her lover's chest, who stumbled along with her and gripped her shoulders to steady her. Erik sometimes wondered if she was aware that his reflexes were in reality fast enough to avoid her and if she, too, liked the act of simply allowing her to bump into him and then throw her arms around him as she was doing now.
"Hello, darling", she purred gently. "It's good to have you back. How has your day been?"
"It's better now", he whispered slowly into her hair as the tight knot in his shoulders gently unraveled.
"I was wondering what kept you so long", she lifted her chin to look at him. "We were just about to go out."
"I'm sorry. Jack kept me - I'll tell you about it later."
"Oh, alright. We're just going to take a walk - do you want to come along?" Alina asked, giving him one of her sweet smiles that wrinkled the corners of her dark eyes. He was still holding her shoulders, and he felt his thumb run across her arm a little bit.
"I was going to - oh, to hell with it. If you're inviting me, I'll go." Amelija exited the house and closed the door, but he was still distracted looking at Alina. It didn't matter at that moment what embarrassment he might put himself up to if she'd keep smiling at him like that.
"Alright", she wrapped her arm around his and waited for her sister to catch up. "Anyway, Walter visited while you were away."
"Oh." they started walking along the path, Alina in the middle with Erik and Amelija on each of her sides. Amelija was uncharacteristically quiet.
"And?"
"He taught himself geometry while only kind-of reading some of the books and solving the problems."
"I thought that book would last him longer."
"So did I, because I thought he'd have to read the actual text to understand the math and reading would have taken much longer, but apparently, it was much easier to power through the math on trial and error and ignore the instructions." she waved her hand, gesturing with frustration."Kids! You never know what they're going to do, but you can be sure it's not what you want them to do."
"And how do you know he didn't just learn it all wrong?" Erik laughed.
"I tested him", Amelija chimed in quietly. Her usual confident attitude

seemed somewhat deflated. "He solved almost everything correctly", she shrugged with slight defeat. "When I asked him to explain how he did it - well, he certainly has his way of understanding things, but his logic is sound. It's just not how, uh, normal people would conventionally think."
"Hm", Erik nodded to himself. Just when Amelija expected him to shut in as he normally did when she entered the conversation, he asked, "Are you well-learned in mathematics and such yourself?"
"I'd like to think that I am", she answered, unsure if he was trying to mock her, but his tone had no sarcasm once again - just a genuine question phrased in a strangely blunt way, which she struggled to also answer bluntly. "I've had some renowned tutors, and I was among their more advanced students."
"Then he's lucky", he replied. "He might learn something new from you while you're here."
"I... suppose", Amelija blinked at that unexpected compliment. Alina made no sound, but her grip on his arm tightened very slightly.
"That's true. I think Walter is hungry for some knowledge and guidance", Alina remarked, "even if he sometimes seems like all he wants to do is prove that he doesn't need anyone."
"I'm not sure I want a sassy child in my daily schedule," Amelija mumbled under her chin.
"Oh, I felt the same", Erik retorted before Alina could start talking her into it, "unfortunately, it's not up to you. Walter's tenacity when some subject catches his interest is astounding; your best bet is to give him tasks hard or extensive enough that they will occupy him long enough that you can get some peace."
"And you're speaking from personal experience?" Amelija raised a judgmental eyebrow at him.
"Oh, yes. If you don't have Alina's patience and kindness, which I don't", he bowed his head humbly at Alina who rolled her eyes, "you have to resort to other solutions to keep your peace. I've had quite a lot of experience avoiding her large flock of children until she can deal with them herself."
"I see", Amelija smiled a sincerely mischievous smile at him for the first time. "Sound advice, from one unkind and impatient arse to another."

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He played along. The sisters' talking and bickering was a welcome distraction from the hurricane in his mind, and even though it exhausted him tremendously to constantly pay attention to his surroundings and the conversation, he gave a few tentative attempts to participate - but still, as Amelija excused herself in the evening and left them alone in the kitchen to go sleep in her room, he breathed a sigh of relief. He grabbed a plate to finally eat his first meal of the day now that he could relax and sat opposite Alina who took her hairpins out and ruffled her hair.
"What happened with Jack?" she asked, relaxing her head on her hand.
"Nothing. Everything is perfectly normal with Jack", he replied tensely.
"Why are you asking?"
"You know why I'm asking", she smiled. "You're distressed."
"Am I so fragile that I cannot handle a little distress?" he hissed, looking angrily at his plate when he noticed her frowning and pulling back a little in the corner of his eye.
"I'm sorry. That was not directed at you in the slightest." Erik sighed, rubbing his temple. "Please don't look at me like that. I've had a long day, and as I said I'm sorry."
Alina nodded, still looking slightly annoyed.
"Fine," he told her everything that happened since the morning - starting with the fleeting almost-admission of his wariness about her family and ending with everything that happened with Jack and Heidel.
Alina listened silently, then nodded once again when he was done, moving to sit next to him.
"I don't know what to think about it all", he admitted.
Alina shrugged. "It sounds to me like you've maybe made a... friend who is also a musician."
"No?" he turned to her in surprise. "For that to happen, wouldn't he have to like me? I don't feel like I've made a particularly good impression for now."
"I, uh, I hate to tell you this, darling", she shifted slightly in embarrassment, "but you, uh, never make a very warm and friendly impression when you meet someone. And yet we're all here."
He paused, then let out a short, quiet laugh. "That was painful, but deserved."
"When we met, you -"
"Yes, I'm aware", he interrupted gently, taking her hand in his. "When we met, I said a great many disturbing things, and you sat there, listened

politely, pretending very hard not to be scared, as I pretended very hard not to be completely enchanted. But," he waved his free hand, "if I'm being honest, I wasn't trying very hard to be polite to Heidel, and I didn't consider him as a friend as much as I was worried about what he'd think about me as a musician."
"Luckily, he seems to think highly of you."
"Do you think so?" Erik scratched at his temple. "I'm not entirely sure what to think. I think someone of his caliber wouldn't bother trying to help me if he disliked what he saw - but -"
"But it bothers you that he doesn't think it's perfect", Alina mused. "He sees... mistakes."
"Yes", he admitted quietly.
"Hm." she paused for a moment as she tried to think of something useful to say. The concept of mistakes always seemed to burn like hot iron in Erik's mind. A perfect work would be untouchable, she realized. It wouldn't be subject to analyzing, poking, prodding, and criticizing - it would simply be worthy of - Alina knew what it would be worthy of, but she doubted Erik wanted to talk about it so openly.
"I think it's juvenile of me to take this so personally", he admitted. "Jack is right, I- I should be able to talk to other musicians normally. It's the most natural thing in the world for most people."
"And for you?"
"Frankly, I would like to go to that cave a few miles from here and never emerge back to the surface until Heidel forgets he ever saw me or a single note I wrote down. It seems I am too, well, fragile." he shook his head. That one remark stung him where it hurt - it was much worse than simply being told he was being rude, to be made aware of how obvious it was that he was, in fact, afraid.
"Everyone is fragile", Alina shrugged. "And Jack likes to call you names when he's mad at you. I don't think he meant anything by it."
Erik kept silent, staring stubbornly ahead.
"I think he only does it when everything else fails", Alina stretched and continued before Erik could say anything else, "In any case, I have to say, that was an impressive amount of composure on your side. If I was in that situation - I don't know, I think I'd be terrified. Maybe I'd just leave."
"I was", Erik replied barely above a whisper. "And I almost did."
"Ah, but you didn't."

"No." he bit his lip. "And now there is no going back. I have to see it through."
"No?" Alina smiled at him slightly. "You don't have to, you can simply never meet Heidel or mention it to him ever again."
"Oh, no", he shook his head, letting out a short laugh. "You know me better than that. I have to do it now, or I'll eat myself alive."
"Alright, yes, I was just teasing you", she laughed back. "Once you're a famous musician, I do hope I'll get to hear your music."
"Once I'm a famous musician", he repeated mockingly as he stood up and pulled her by her hands, spinning her around, "as opposed to, say, hearing it every day all through your own house?"

Chapter 28:Intermezzo

An incredibly handsome man barged into the room, ignoring Amelija completely as he paced across and stood directly in front of Erik, waving his finger at him with obvious anger and annoyance.

"I know you took them!" he said. "Where are they?"

"So you admit?" Erik smiled slightly.

"You smug, arrogant, thieving bastard -"

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about", Erik held his hands up in the air. "I'd much prefer if you didn't drag my name through the mud in front of our guest."

"Don't play dumb -" Jack said before his nature took over and he coughed slightly. "...guest?"

"Yes. This young lady is Alina's sister, and she'll be staying with us for a few weeks."

Jack turned around, looking at Amelija for the first time.

"Good afternoon", she raised her eyebrow with slight irony, still faintly annoyed by the absolute gall this man had, to be handsome and not notice her.

"Oh", Jack said, pausing for a second too long before he blinked, put on a polite smile, and walked over to her, taking off his hat with one hand while extending the other to her. "Lovely to meet you, Miss. My name is Jack Franklin."

"Amelija Boričević." she flashed him a hopefully friendly-yet-mysterious smile.

"I was told you'd come, and I was looking forward to meeting you", he said, looking into her eyes. "Alina told me many lovely things about - "

"Cut the bullshit, Jack, please", Alina scoffed. "I told you she was a bitch, and by God, I stand by it." Alina's voice cut through them like a knife, effectively destroying any magic left at the moment.

"Lovely, Alina", Amelija grinned at her. "Good word travels far, as always."

"Ehhh", Alina shrugged. "Sorry, Jack, but I'm dying to hear what you two are bickering about again."

"Your darling stole my chess set", he informed her dryly.

"I have done no such thing", Erik said with slight smugness from across the room - Amelija twitched; she couldn't get used to how easy it was to forget he was still there. "Jack's home is, as he has informed me, impossible to break in. He even told me he'd be willing to bet I wouldn't be able to get inside. So I couldn't have possibly done it."

Jack looked at Alina with a look that begged for permission to break something on his head.

"However, if Jack's home was broken in, as soon as he admits it, I'll gladly help him look for whatever was stolen", Erik finished with a positively saccharine tone in his voice.

Alina dragged her hand down her face, then laughed. "I take it back. You two settle this in whichever way you will, but I want nothing to do with it. I've had enough of these during the school year."

Erik shrugged, looking at her innocently. "I wouldn't dream of involving you, darling. We both know how much you deserve some rest."

"Why yes, yes I do", Alina smiled sweetly. "Some rest and some peace. And quiet. And good will from men."

They looked at each other for a second when Erik sighed softly and turned to Jack.

"You've got friends in high places", he remarked. "Fine. Come with me. And you should change your lock, this one could be picked by a monkey with nothing but a pair of dull tweezers."

He left through the front door, leaving Jack and Amelija to look awkwardly at each other, ignoring Alina completely.

Alina cleared her throat. "Jack, I think wherever he hid your chess set, it's still in your house. It's certainly not here."

"How do you know?" Jack took his eyes off Amelija with great effort to look at Alina.

"Well, firstly, I don't think something like that could just appear in this house without me noticing, and secondly, I don't think he could resist bragging to me about stealing it if it was here so he could prove it."

"I- right, I should head back home." Jack put his hat on again, looking at Amelija. "It was lovely meeting you, Miss. I hope to have the honor again."

"I-" Amelija stuttered, blushing slightly, and composed herself before she could say something stupid like "I hope so as well!"; instead she smiled a smug little smile and settled for, "Well, you just might."

He nodded and closed the door behind him, leaving Amelija to deal with a vicious round of teasing from her older sister.

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Jack sped along the sunny path until he caught up to Erik, still fuming with a mixture of annoyance and… something decidedly different.

Erik slowed down when he heard him approaching, and cleared his throat. "Jack, the part about the lock is important."

"Sorry?" Jack snapped out of his spell, trying to remember why they were here.

"Changing the lock on your front door."

"There's nothing wrong with my lock", Jack snapped. "It was professionally made!"

"Whoever made it? Someone from the seventeenth century?"

"My father made it, you prick. He's a professional locksmith and a damned good one at that. Always said old-fashioned heavy locks are harder to pick than the flimsy modern ones. Just because you're insane enough to figure it out"

"I'd appreciate it if you'd stop calling me insane and whatnot whenever you're annoyed, Jack", Erik interrupted. This was not going how he expected, he realized as Jack clamped his mouth and furiously kicked a pebble out of his way. Jack's stubborn refusal to change his old lock was completely irrational coming from a rich man living on an island full of crime - and Erik had tried to talk him into it before; he'd thought a demonstration would simply annoy Jack and not offend his entire family. He decided on a different approach. "I did not mean to insult your father. What he said is correct, or was, in a way. That lock was incredibly well-made, whenever it was made, but it's simply outdated. People have discovered ways to pick these locks since, and it's not that hard when you have the time and tools to study them a little bit. And modern flimsy locks are easier to break, but they are much more complicated to pick. They require, well, flimsy tools."

Jack rubbed his nose. "And if somebody decided to break my flimsy lock instead of picking it?"

"Well, that would still require a lot more effort than just breaking your window, so I wouldn't worry about it exactly."

"Breaking a window makes a lot of noise."

"So does breaking a steel lock." Erik shrugged. "They're not that flimsy. What would be the point?"

Jack nodded, biting his lip in obvious distress. "My old man never liked change. He likes his honest-to-God, old-fashioned ways. That's put him through a lot of trouble. Never could adapt."

"Huh", Erik said.

"He was worried the mobsters would get me when I decided to come back, so he made that lock for me before I left California. Said it would protect me. I had no reason not to believe him - they didn't even bother trying to break our lock when they... made us leave, you know."

"No?" Erik turned to him in surprise. Jack didn't talk about his family's exile often, and never mentioned their current whereabouts to him until now. "What did they do?"

"They burned our house down to the ground", Jack laughed a joyless laugh. "It sent a clear enough message and achieved the goal."

Erik kept silent for a long time. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine. It was a long time ago."

He thought about it some more.

"My house in France burned down as well", he finally said. Alina said people feel better if you share something of yours after they confide in you.

"So you said. You said you burned it yourself."

"No, not really. I set fire to something else - a theater - well, a part of it. I set fire to one particular box, but some very important people were sitting in it. It was supposed to be a distraction, so I tried to make it burn slowly - but you can't control these things. Nobody was hurt in the end, but they knew who it was and a mob gathered and burned my house down. I barely escaped - I thought I would suffocate there or burn alive. It was the most horrifying thing", he finished, fiddling with the cufflinks on his sleeves. The

damned things were proving to be convenient for fiddling in situations where he couldn't just take out a piece of string or start cutting something to occupy his hands. Well, I also kidnapped a person, but we're not on that level of confidentiality yet. Or ever, hopefully.

"You can't even comprehend how fast it spreads until you see it", Jack frowned at him, still looking very irritated but a lot less sad than before. "Was there no other way to create that diversion other than setting their asses on fire?"

"If I'm being completely honest - perhaps I thought some of the French elite deserved to smell a little bit of smoke, just to teach them a lesson or two." he clasped the cufflinks open and closed again, resisting the urge to scratch at his scalp. "I think I picked the wrong ones. And the wrong place. And I paid for it, as you can see. They destroyed everything I had."

"Some mighty justice it was", Jack scoffed.

"No, it was a lynching. I won't pretend I wanted justice myself. Justice was, at that point, a luxury I never had or expected in my life - after a while, I just started seeking revenge, through whatever means." he sighed. "I didn't mean to burden you with all this. I'm sorry your house burned down, and I'm sorry about picking your father's lock. I would not have done it if I knew."

"Really? Because you seemed to be having a jolly good time." Jack gave him a toothy smile.

"I would not have done it", Erik repeated. "Jack, teasing you is fun, I'll admit, but I wouldn't deliberately scare you. Especially with something that terrible."

Jack walked in silence, looking as if a weight was lifted off his shoulders. It occurred to Erik that he had until now been his friend even without Erik paying that much mind to Jack's feelings.

"Fine", Jack finally said.

"Really?"

"Well, it's already done, you've traumatized me and I don't know how I'll forgive you, unless-" Jack grinned.

"Unless what?"

"Amelija is very beautiful", Jack said with badly-feigned nonchalance. Erik looked at him, then returned his glance at the road ahead. Erik had always been very good at noticing changes in people's feelings by the small gestures - but incredibly bad at actually interpreting them, so as per usual, he had no idea why Jack suddenly looked so uneasy.

"I'd like to meet her again", Jack offered again when the oblivious jackass failed to take the hint.

"So meet her."

"I'm asking you to introduce me, jackass. Are you making me uncomfortable on purpose?"

"What?" Erik turned his entire head towards Jack now. "Uncomfortable? Why in hell would I do that? If you want to meet her, meet her; you've never had a problem with it. How am I supposed to help? Between the two of us, am I an exemplar of social skills?"

"Because I", Jack waved his hand, then balled it into a fist as he calmed himself. "I like her, and I don't want to just drop in and say ay, pretty lady, my name is Jack and I fancy you because then she might get the wrong idea and I want to do it right! Is that clear enough?"

"Ah," Erik said. He brought one hand to his mouth. "If you need my help, you're damned."

"I don't, I just wanted you to create a situation for both of us to be at the same place. It's just how these things are done. And don't sell yourself short you've done something right", Jack grinned a very toothy grin at him.

"I, uh, no, absolutely not", Erik shook his head. "Not in a million years. I just didn't do any of the incredibly wrong things that crossed my mind. Really."

"Perhaps, if you dissect it enough, that's all it takes." Jack winked. "So? Is that a yes, Jack, I'll help you out as a friend even though it might inconvenience me oh-so-slightly?"

Erik looked back at him in silence.

"You do realize you owe me?" Jack raised an eyebrow.

Erik looked back at him, doubt creeping into his eyes. "For Heidel? I never asked for that!"

"No, for Alina. She fancied you for months before she ever said anything until I talked to her."

"Is that so?" Erik asked quietly, with a spark of something alarming.

"Yes, and don't give me that tone. She wouldn't have noticed you also had feelings for her if I hadn't told her. Once she noticed, all she did was her own volition. I never forced her into anything."

"Alright", Erik said slowly. "What do you want me to do, exactly?"

"It's not that hard", Jack waved his left hand around as his right searched in his pocket for the keys. Erik decided to, respectfully, not offer to simply pick the lock again.

"Alina is with her sister all the time. You could ask her - it would be much simpler."

"I definitely would ask Alina if I wanted a third-degree interrogation about my intentions before I've even had a proper conversation with the woman - Nah, listen, I'll think of something. Might just ask you to pass on a note, that surely wouldn't inconvenience you too much?" Jack opened the door, finally, and let Erik inside. "Well, apparently, my chess set is in here?"

"Yes", Erik hurried towards the living room with Jack at his heels. He proceeded towards a very unassuming spot in one of the corners, knelt, and pulled at one of the floorboards.

"Hey!" Jack exclaimed just as he pried it open. "What are you doing?"

"Opening your secret floor space, or whatever it's called in English", Erik said.

"I don't have a secret floor space! What did you do to my floor?"

Erik looked at the neat rectangular hole beneath the floorboards, then at the plank, then at Jack again. "I'm sorry, you didn't know about it? Who did you buy this house from?"

"Know about what?"

"I didn't dig a hole in your floor, Jack. The floor was hollow in this spot, and the board gave way as soon as I tried to pull on it. Look", he carefully took out Jack's chess set, then put the board back. "Listen, it sounds different when I step over it. You can hear it sounds hollow, unlike the other boards."

"I can't hear a goddamn thing", Jack admitted.

"Oh. Well, I mean, it was obvious you weren't using it, but I assumed you were at least aware of it", Erik said. "Sorry? I didn't mean to intrude in your home-"

"At least now I know about it", Jack put his hands in his pockets, looking at the perfectly innocent-looking floorboard. "Does your house have a secret floor hiding space?"

"Mine? It does, but I don't put anything there. Too easy to find - as I said, you can hear the resonance when you walk over it. I only put it there to distract from the, uh, secret wall hiding space and the secret compartment inside the ceiling." It had become a sort of hide-and-seek game between him and Alina since the house had been remade - even though she lacked

Yana's natural ability to snuff out anything that was hidden (which was why Yana wasn't invited to participate in the game) - she was getting quite the hang of how Erik's thought process worked, so it was becoming near impossible to hide anything from her.

"That's a lot of secret compartments."

"Well, I have a lot of secrets." or had, at least. The number is getting smaller at an alarming rate.

"Speaking of secrets", Jack said, "Have you told Alina about how you might just join the great New York music scene? Or are you waiting to seal the deal before you tell her?"

"Alina knows everything", Erik said with unease.

"Did she tell you that you're being stupid and should just correct the parts Heidel told you about and visit him again?" Jack smiled, putting his chessboard back in its rightful place.

"No, she just thought it very loudly", Erik rolled his eyes.

"Good. You know, Fritz doesn't go around picking up strays and making them into stars. He wouldn't bother with you at all if he didn't think you already had what it takes - he has no time to coach you into the kind of composer he needs."

"Yes, I know", Erik sighed. "I'm… working on it."

"I've seen how stubborn you can be", Jack laughed. "If there's something you want to have exactly your way, I've no doubt you'll fight for it. Where's all that burning fire you had in you when we were building the park?"

"Why does it matter?"

"I'm just asking, you arse. Satisfy my curiosity, and I might just let you choose my new lock."

"Choosing a lock is the easiest thing in the world, and so is building a structure that doesn't collapse", Erik waved his hand. "There are right and wrong answers and plenty of ways to check if you're right or wrong. If the person who hired you doesn't like it, it doesn't matter. It's for them, and so you just change it until the solution suits them better."

"Right. And that, I suppose, doesn't work with music?"

"No", Erik said, "Not when it's your music. The notion of making something both to my liking and someone else's is simply something I've never done before."

ooo

On the evening of the next day, Alina opened the door to Erik's room gently and with care - which was far from her usual enthusiastic barging into rooms - and smiled gently at the sight of him reading on his bed.

"How are the Karamazovs?" she asked, locking the door behind her. She had her key now - after Amelija arrived, when it was obvious he wouldn't stop locking his door, he simply made another key and gave it to her without much fuss one day. She tried not to make a big deal out of it.

"I put that on hold for now." he closed the book, his movements slow and tired as he sat up. "I'm attempting to educate myself on the history of music in this country."

"That sounds interesting", Alina sat down on the bed next to him, leaning her back against the wall. "Any details you might want to share?"

"Well, the books I've so far found in the Academy of Music library are largely about the music made by European descendants. Other things are either not written down - or those books are not kept in the Academy's library."

Alina scoffed. "Perhaps the good people of the Academy don't deem it important enough."

"I do", he said slowly. "It's good to know what the Academy considers important, at least now that I'm still a nobody in their eyes. But I don't deem their tastes any more important than the music of the people they've cast out, in fact -" He hopped off the bed. "Maybe even less. Do you want to walk with me? I've been here all day."

"Sure", Alina stood up and walked over to the door, only to turn around and see Erik sitting on the window frame.

"Are we taking the escape route again?" she raised her eyebrows.

He smiled slightly for the first time in days. "I would prefer to avoid any niceties on my way out, if possible."

"Fine. If the window shuts and locks behind us, you'll be the one knocking and asking Amelija to open the front door."

"Fair." Erik hopped outside with ease, helping Alina as she fumbled with the layers of her dress. He led her along a little trail that continued behind their house, away from people, under the dark blue evening sky.

"I've found a place you might like", he said tentatively after a moment. "If you're still interested go exploring with me."

"I'm always interested." she grinned her characteristic mischief-grin. "Now? You could have told me to change into something practical."

"No, not now. I'm too tired. We'll go soon enough."

"You're not doing well", she said gently. "Let me finish - you're handling it well, I'm not criticizing you, I'm just worried."

"Hm." he looked ahead. "I'm not handling it well. You just dropped by at a conveniently good time today."

"Perhaps I am what makes your mood conveniently good", she suggested playfully.

"You are the sun of my sky1, darling", he bowed his head. "But in this case, no. This is not something you can control, or should attempt to."

Alina shrugged. "Maybe I can help, that's all."

"Maybe I can handle it myself."

"You absolutely can, but why would you?" she waved her hand slightly, careful not to move too forcefully. "Ever since we came here, I told you it's important that we can rely on each other. We're a duo working together, not two units simply coexisting."

"This isn't the same -" he almost snapped, then stopped to think. "Listen, darling. If you want a duo working together, you need to have two people who can equally hold their own. One of them can't constantly be carrying the other. You know that. I know you're used to carrying everyone, so I'm trying not to take it personally, but you still should have some respect- " he blinked. "I just said that, didn't I? It sounded a lot less unhinged in my head." Most things did these days.

"Mhm", Alina mumbled dryly. "Do you feel disrespected?"

"Yes, but you're not the one doing it, I think." he sighed. "I- 'm sorry. I have been spending most of my time recently trying to decipher what people mean when they talk to me. It's getting a bit - too loud, too much, too irritating. I'd like to just", curl up and hibernate for a month or two, "rest, I suppose. I can't sleep. I know how it sounds - it annoys me that simple things can throw me off balance so much, but - "

"No, it's not simple things", Alina interrupted. "When I moved to London alone and started working, I had the same problem. People never said what they meant, and there was constantly some subtext, some unspoken message everyone but me seemed to pick up on - I felt like a complete idiot, being the only one who didn't just naturally understand it all."

"And what did you do?" he asked.

"I made some mistakes, and it was not the end of the world. I made some people angry, which was also not the end of the world, and I learned." she shrugged.

"Well, it's all just", he ran his fingers through his hair. "Unnerving, and I might start snapping at people sometime soon, and that will not be good."

"If you do that, you don't have to worry about subtext, because they'll tell you very clearly what they think about it", Alina laughed. "Didn't Jack do the same yesterday morning?"

"Ah", he said with slight embarrassment. "That- turned out to be a lot less harmless joke and a lot more incredible violation of personal boundaries than I had intended."

"Did you settle it?"

"Yes, I apologized, but it unnerves me that I didn't have the common sense to predict it would bother him so much in the first place." he paused. "You know, if he had done something like that to me, messed with something too personal to me, I would not have been so… forgiving. It probably would have ended very badly."

"Well, we are all learning to get along with each other."

Erik sighed. Things Alina said made perfect sense, but didn't quite seem to capture the nagging feeling of something wrong in the back of his head.

"Darling, you are by no means the same man you were, but you're wrong if you think you can simply beat the devil out of yourself and never make a mistake again. You've had the temper all along, and perhaps instead of forcibly pushing it down you could make something constructive out of it."

"Constructive? Out of rage?" he looked at her. "You never seemed to think those two could coexist."

"Oh, I've seen plenty of destructive rage in my life. But maybe the passion, the emotion behind it, is something that can be expressed and turned into

something beautiful."

Erik decided to refrain from saying what he thought about it, as it would have been decidedly unconstructive.

"I'm saying you should spread your wings a bit, Erik", she winked. "You've lived the last year and a half obsessed with avoiding doing something wrong - and you've certainly succeeded at it. But if you want to do something right and important, you can't be constantly tying yourself up so you don't rub others the wrong way. Instead of pushing down all this energy so you wouldn't hurt anybody, why don't you change its course into something beautiful? Nobody has your talent for turning pain into beauty."

Erik stared silently ahead as he walked.

"Nothing terrible will happen if you let yourself be", Alina smiled at him. "We can take it. I can take it."

"On the contrary, people get hurt rather badly when I do that", he whispered. "There are some impulses I can't give in to."

"Impulses? The only time I've seen you impulsive was when someone threatened us."

"Yes, well, that happens a lot. Or I think it happens, then after I realize it was safe, it's already too late and - things happen that I don't always entirely remember- " he sighed. "We should talk about this another time."

"But-"

"Alina, I'm not keeping secrets from you. I'll tell you when I'm not so tired."

ooo

The truce between Erik and Amelija lasted for a short time - they all lived in peace for a while, Erik going out of his way to reciprocate the kind gestures Amelija had given him, with all three of them occasionally engaging in conversation, drinking lemonade on hot evenings, or walking around under the starlight. Amelija spent her days with Alina and evenings going out -

sometimes with Alina, sometimes alone, sometimes with friends she'd meet during their daily explorations of New York City. Alina didn't protest, claiming Amelija was old and smart enough to choose her company, and secretly enjoying little pockets of time she would have alone with her darling. Amelija didn't mention it, even though she knew. She also made absolutely no sign that she'd like to see their handsome friend Jack again, even if she stiffened every time he passed by their house to say hello, winking and tipping his hat at her. She made absolutely no effort to seem interested.

The peace seemed almost too good to be true until the inevitable happened.

Erik had gotten worse.

Not worse, Alina explained, but he was not entirely himself. He seemed to withdraw into himself more and more until he barely said anything or interacted with others at all. The only sign of any emotion Amelija got from him was the rustling she could hear from his room at night, followed by the opening of his door and nervous pacing about the living room. In the evenings she'd stay up longer, he didn't come out at all.

It would only be a matter of time before Amelija finally gave in to curiosity and asked about it.

"Don't ask him about the nightmares. Ever. Unless he tells you himself", Alina said quietly.

"Is that a rule?" Amelija raised her eyebrows.

"It's more of a guideline on how to handle him when he's in these states, without much fuss."

"And does your darling have many of those?" Amelija asked.

"Episodes or rules?"

"Both."

"Episodes are random and unpredictable. Something that might trigger it once, won't even register at a different time. It's a matter of... more things going badly at the same time, I suppose. Then he gets snappy, irritable, and irrational. Sometimes paranoid. He spends most of the time alone, walking around or doing something with his hands." Alina paused. "Those are not so bad. He's learned to live with it so he doesn't take it out on others. But after the... fire, so to speak, comes ash. Then he clams up for a while, and we simply wait. He does nothing, says nothing, and barely eats. The nightmares get worse and then stop, then he gets better."

"And the rules?" Amelija pressed.

"Ah, alright. You can't raise your voice around him or wave your arms too close to his head. You'll see when it starts to bother him, he'll start flinching or rubbing his temples. Don't try to touch him without permission, even if it's completely innocent or unimportant. Don't sneak up on him - well, you probably aren't quite enough to do that anyway."

"Reasonable so far."

"You have to be very careful what you say because he will twist your words into something malicious even when you didn't mean it that way. You have to be very, very clear about what you mean and why you're saying it. He'll know if you're lying. Also, don't mention his appearance in general, especially not the mask. If he wants to talk about it he'll tell you. Don't ask him anything about his life in Paris, unless it's about auntie Giry. And maybe most importantly", Alina took a breath, "don't look at him for too long."

"Excuse me?"

"If he thinks you're staring at him, especially if he's under some intense emotion, he'll get very defensive. Don't tell him you're not staring - I know, I know - just look away and it will stop."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard", Amelija said furiously. "What, you can't look at your own man as much as you want to?"

"I can", Alina clarified. "You can't. Though I don't, when he's like this, because it would be cruel. It messes with him."

"So this is all to help him?" Amelija crossed her arms. "Or are you trying to help yourself survive a man who can't control himself?"

"I am in no danger", Alina said quietly. "Believe me."

"And if you went up to him and did all these things, would you still not be in danger?"

"Still, yes. Though it would make both our lives more difficult because he would get worse and I would have to deal with it", Alina started rubbing her temples. Amelija wondered if she picked up that habit in the past year - or maybe she just didn't notice it before.

"You don't have to deal with anything", Amelija said tentatively.

"I chose to. I knew what I was getting into." Alina sighed and looked straight at Amelija. "And Amelija, believe me, if someone you loved woke up screaming every night from nightmares he can barely talk about if he flinched at every sound and movement and spent days wasting away unable to hold a conversation... You, too, would do anything to make him better."

Amelija kept silent.

"You've been here for two weeks, and you're already asking me how to help him." Alina pointed out.

"I'm asking if I should know anything for my own sake -"

"Unlike that dress, Amelija, cold ruthlessness doesn't suit you", Alina retorted. "It's your least convincing act, if you ask me, whatever everyone else might think."

"Oh, piss off", Amelija scowled, then stilled. "I think it would be best if I stayed away."

"Maybe", Alina sighed. "It'll pass soon."

ooo

Amelija kept her resolution to stay away for the next few days. She didn't make it obvious, but she went along with her days without bothering Erik or trying to push him into interacting with anyone else. She pretended he didn't exist until she had something direct to ask him - can you pass the salt? - and waited to see if he would acknowledge her presence. Which he didn't. He was mostly in his room, sometimes completely silent, sometimes whispering something to Alina so quietly that she couldn't hear it through the door. On the rare occasions, he came out, he looked very, very tired. Alina would sometimes talk him into going outside for a walk, or sitting in the living room - but though he obliged, he didn't seem to be entirely present, his eyes slightly glassy. It seemed he couldn't follow a single conversation for longer than a few minutes, so they all let him be. Yana would occasionally come over, alone. Amelija wasn't home most times when she did, but one day she came early and caught a snippet of conversation as she softly entered. She had learned to mimic Alina's unusually quiet demeanor, and so Erik barely noticed her as she arrived - which would have offended her at first, but it was better than him jerking his head in some silent alarm whenever she entered the room.

"Where is Piotr?" he asked her quietly. He seemed to be fiddling with some loose string between his fingers, tying various complicated knots and untying them, over and over again.

"He's sleeping. Walter took him to play today, and whatever they did, he fell asleep the moment he came home", Yana said calmly, her gaze fixed on the embroidery in her hand. Clever, Amelija thought. She didn't have to look at him at all and had something to occupy her during his long pauses in the conversation.

"You can bring him here. I won't harm him", he said so quietly that Amelija almost didn't hear him.

"I will", Yana replied, still not looking at him at all. How she managed that, Amelija had no idea. Even her own, sometimes ruthless, the heart would have melted slightly at that implication. "I'll bring him over tomorrow. Don't worry about it."

"But if he doesn't want - "

"I know", she cut him off, gently but sternly. "If he doesn't want to come, he won't come. I'll ask him first. But you should rest until then."

"I can't sleep", he admitted, rubbing his temples with his fingers. Amelija grabbed the door handle again, deciding she could instead find a nice bench and read in the sunlight outside. She opened the door quietly and pushed through it as discreetly as she could. Erik still didn't notice her, but she could swear Yana gave her a barely-there nod as she closed the door behind her.

After that, Amelija let him be. Not even Erik could find any question or judgment in her eyes as she nodded at him when they passed each other in the morning.

He might have found it easier to ignore whatever she thought of him if she hadn't started to seem much more worthy of respect than when he first met her.

She had fully intended to keep doing so, until one night she couldn't sleep, kept up by the heat and humidity that came with a sudden heatwave. Her window was open and it made the room more bearable, but lying in bed and trying to sleep was only making her more frustrated so instead, she put on her simple house dress and ventured outside, to read in the living room. She settled herself on the small sofa where she'd usually sit, across from Erik's usual armchair in the corner of the room. The window was behind her, and the light of streetlamps and the moon outside was enough for her to read. She opened her book and tried to concentrate, ignoring the faint rustling that came from the other room.

After some time - probably less than an hour, but she couldn't tell exactly - the rustling intensified, and then stopped. The door opened, and Erik came out silently, still in his mask and clothes. She wondered if he ever took it off when she was in the house. Or at all. He stopped by the sink to pour himself a glass of water and nodded at her.

"Did I wake you up?" he asked, still in that flat, monotonous tone he adopted in the past week.

"No, the heat did." Amelija opened her mouth to ask what kept him awake when she remembered - don't ask him about the nightmares, so she decided against it. "Uh… it's annoying, isn't it? Do these heatwaves last long here?"

He turned his head to look directly at her for the first time that week. Amelija quickly looked down at her book...

"The heatwaves?" he asked. "No. It should be back from maddening to just annoying again in a couple of days if last summer is any indication."

A tiny laugh escaped Amelija. She hadn't heard him speak a whole sentence, let alone try to joke, for over a week now. "That's alright. I'll survive. Mediterranean summers are hotter, and I got used to those."

"I can't sleep", he said to his glass.

"I've noticed", she replied automatically before she could stop herself.

"You have?" He looked at her again, slowly, and she kept her gaze to her book. She felt like she was circling some giant beast, but couldn't tell why. As weak, tired, and unfocused as he was at first glance, something about him still made her skin crawl.

"You're afraid of me", he decided quietly.

"I'm not", Amelija replied, still not looking up from her book.

"Don't lie to me", he said flatly. "I can tell, I've seen it often enough. You're scared."

"This behavior isn't helping that", Amelija snapped. Her snapping was hardly more than a quiet hiss at her book and an angry glance at him, but it woke up some light behind his eyes.

"I see", he said. The dim anger flickering behind his eyes seemed to be tempered down by the strange exhaustion that seemed to emanate from his

every movement. "What about my behavior scares you so?"

"You're staring at me and asking me uncomfortable questions", she said sternly. Don't lie to him. Be direct with him. Well, being honest meant something completely different to Amelija than it did to Alina.

"Ah," he said, and to her surprise, looked away, in front of him, as he leaned a little more into the counter. "Over the years I've eliminated a lot of behaviors that made other people scared. Trial and error. It seems there is always something more. How much do you think will be left of me when I've eliminated them all?"

Amelija looked up from her book back at him, and he met her gaze again.

"At least you're honest", he decided. "Trial and error would have been harder with you."

"Are people normally not?"

"They walk on eggshells around me", he said. "I'm not sure if they think I'll break myself, or them, if they don't."

"Will you?"

Silence.

"Will you?" Amelija pressed.

"No", he whispered. "Not anymore. But I don't hold it against them. There was a time when I might have."

Amelija closed her book. "I'm not afraid of you. Whichever behaviors you might show, there is nothing you can do to me."

"Oh, I know", he said. "You are only here because of her."

Silence.

"As am I." his mouth tightened. "In this situation, I should be afraid of you, to be honest."

"I'm not here to threaten you unless you're a threat to my sister", Amelija said bluntly. She couldn't figure out which level of bluntness was appropriate, to be honest. She could only hope her intuition would know. She didn't have higher ground in this discussion - Alina was already here, with him, so convinced and stubborn that Amelija sincerely doubted any way she might have with her - but Erik, drowning in whatever darkness this was, seemed unaware of this, and as cruel as it may be it was her best shot to find out the truth.

"I would love nothing more than to say that I'm not", he managed slowly.

"At least you're honest. Trial and error would have been harder", Amelija smiled a very toothy grin back at him. "Tell me. What would happen if - if she stopped walking on eggshells, and all you're holding back now came to the surface?"

Another silence.

"Is my sister in danger or not?" Amelija pressed.

"No." the answer was a little clearer this time.
"Do I have your word?" she stood up, pacing impatiently. Yellow eyes followed her every movement. "I don't care how you see yourself, or what you think of yourself. Is my sister in danger or not? Can you give me your word that you've got a good enough grip on yourself never to harm her? Can you take that responsibility and decide, and promise, that you won't harm her?"

She stopped to look at him, green viper eyes meeting with the flame roaring slowly beneath his yellow ones.

"I can", he said. "I already have. It's been seventeen months."

Amelija blinked. "Since you met?"

"Yes."

"And assuming Alina knows this, why is she so wary around you lately?" Amelija asked, looking around her with her hands folded.

"Maybe she doesn't believe it", he whispered. "Maybe there are still some things I need to - eliminate."

"By all means, if this were any other woman, I'd say you can feel free to mold yourself into the kind of man she wants", Amelija puffed impatiently. "But in this situation, how would you say eliminating parts of yourself has worked so far?"

Silence.

"You've found the only woman in the world willing to put up with this much bullshit, and your response is to hide away anything she might not like?" Amelija taunted.

"There is more to love than not harming the other person", Erik hissed back at her, setting down his glass. "Maybe I want to make her happy!"

"Happy?" Amelija laughed. "If Alina wants that sort of happiness, she'll pack up and leave with me, marrying some stupid rich boy and settling down in a lovely villa with a lovely garden. But she's here with you, and instead of constantly trying to provide her with what she doesn't want, maybe you could try giving her what she does want!"

"I have no idea what she wants and what I can give!" he straightened up, hissing back at her.

"She wants you, so you could start by being yourself!" Amelija snapped. "Is this the cause of all this moping? Not some ailment, not some depression that leaves you so tired - you're just deciding to stop existing just so you wouldn't do anything wrong? Coward!" She spat out.

"I'm the coward?" his voice lowered as he inched a step towards her. "Are you really in a position to lecture me, little ice queen on her ice throne? It's

fairly easy to scowl at others and tell them what to do while you're hiding behind this cold sneer! Imagine if you did what you wanted, said what you wanted, instead of parading this little act constantly? Would you even be in this house, screwing up my sleep, or would you be enjoying yourself up at a certain American's home?" he narrowed his eyes at her, mouth gripped into a thin line.

"Now I'm the reason you can't sleep?" she raised her eyebrows, trying to ignore his provocations.

"Yes!" he scowled at her. "You, with your stupid, insufferable need for etiquette and decorum! For everything to be right as it should be! Nothing in this house was ever as it should be, and I loved it that way! And now suddenly I'm supposed to act decently around you because Alina loves you! I'm not one of your well-spoken lordlings, and I never will be! The first time I get a good night's sleep in this house, I'll wake you up with my screaming! The first time I act like myself, as you put it, you'll find out just how scary and strange and freakish I can be! I had just stopped noticing it, next to Alina, and now you had to show up to show me again just how different I am from civilized society!" he stared at her for one more moment, breathing heavily. From the flash of fear that crept through his eyes beneath the anger and frustration, Amelija suddenly knew she'd struck a chord.

"Civilized society bores me", she said coldly. "It's a passing entertainment. One I'm used to, but it means nothing to me."

"And yet- " he hissed.

"If you can't be anything other than yourself without wasting away in this melodramatic darkness, at least own up to it", she straightened, looking him in the eye. "Either wear your disguises convincingly and enjoy the pretending or own up to the truth. Don't apologize for it. Shame also bores me, to be honest."

A smile slowly crept up his thin, scarred mouth. "You could stand to heed your advice, little ice lady."

"Don't call me little lady", she spat out.

"Fair enough", he bowed his head at her, having resumed at least some of his former personality before he left the room without a word.

Amelija stared at the closed door of his bedroom for a few seconds after he left with such seething wrath she nearly set it in flames, but then rolled her eyes and sat down, trying to focus on her book.

I'm sure certain Americans would at least be less annoying to be around.

Erik stormed back into his bedroom, Alina shifting slowly beneath the covers to face him. "I knew you two would sort it out amongst yourselves."

"Your sister is goddamn insufferable", he whispered in annoyance as he sat on the bed next to her, running his hands through his hair.

"Yes, well", she purred lazily as she took his hand in hers, "I seem to love that about people."

Chapter 29:Identity

Jack came the next morning unannounced while Amelija was still sleeping, and after tipping his hat to Alina went straight to Erik, who blinked a little trying to clear his head as he was drinking his coffee. He'd managed to get a whole few hours of sleep last night, but it didn't make him feel that much better.

"Well, I've found a way to get you your papers", Jack sat across the table from Erik, sliding him a considerable bunch of paperwork. "Had to pull some favors, but with the information you've provided me from France and your so-far spotless record in this community it won't be too much of a problem."

"Mhm", Erik put his coffee down and reached for the papers. As he looked down, Jack noticed dark circles in the small area of skin that could be seen under Erik's eyes. "I've spent so much time worrying about what separated men from beasts, wondering how I could get myself on the right side of that distinction. I'm delighted to hear that all I was missing was some incredibly ugly papers with meaningless information and stamps that can be easily forged. I'm growing increasingly convinced you could falsify my way into Heaven after I die with some sketchy friends and fake passports."

"Well, I'm glad you've learned you can count on me", Jack winked back.

"Thank you, and I suppose these are not finished?" Erik shifted through the first few documents, pausing at one of them.

"Which ones? The ones you need to fill in for citizenship are not finished. The top ones are documentation I've, uh, generated in place of the stuff you were missing."

"I assume this is to be my birth certificate?" Erik waved his hand, looking at the piece of paper with slight annoyance.

"Aren't you the one who speaks French?" Jack shrugged. "It's given me quite a headache, you know? I had to find another French birth certificate from thirty years ago so I could get my uh, friend, to make it look believably similar. If you look at the date, you'll see that you will be turning twenty-nine this July, in case you want to celebrate - "

"Jack, you spelled my name wrong," Erik said slowly, shifting his gaze to him.

Jack closed his eyes and reclined in his chair, letting out a long, drawn-out, dramatic sigh. "Have I? Which of the four letters in the word "Giry" have I managed to omit?"

Alina shifted behind Erik to look at the paper, then laughed slightly bringing her hand to her forehead. "None." Before Jack could breathe with relief, she added, "You spelled his first name wrong. It's not a common English spelling, it's Erik with a k."

Jack clasped his hands together as if in prayer. "I assume that's not so very important, is it, after all the trouble I've been through?"

Erik looked at the paper. "I- I suppose-" by the frowning of his eyes, it was very obvious he was holding back a storm, and barely.

"You won't be able to let it go, will you?" Jack mumbled into his hands. During his somewhat tempestuous twenties, Jack had changed and faked his name more than once, though it always remained similar enough that the people who knew him as a child kept calling him the same without anybody noticing. He had very little emotional connection to his name in its current form. "I mean, you've picked out the last name, the year and place of birth, everything else here-"

"Because it's my name", Erik blurted out slightly too loud and with earnest sadness in his voice that surprised all three of them. He pointed at the

certificate again. "It's the only true thing on this damned paper, and it's wrong!"

Jack nodded with resignation. "Fair enough. I can understand that." not that it made him any more eager to go through all that trouble again.

"But, Jack", Alina chimed in, "I assume this paper is the original? This information isn't copied anywhere else yet until he submits the whole application, right?"

"Right", Jack said. "And I'd advise you to send a copy to Antoinette Giry, just in case anybody writes to her for proof."

"Right, and before we do that, I imagine it wouldn't be very hard for someone resourceful to turn that "c" into a "k" and have it all done and over with without any additional fuss on your account?" Alina said. "I mean, it's literally that one letter. I could forge it by now, after all the kids whose names I, uh, spelled wrong and had to correct later."

Erik shrugged. "If that is true - if this is the only copy - then it won't be a problem. Nobody will know I changed it, not from looking at it."

Jack unclasped his hands, waving them in a peaceful gesture. "If it's important to you, go ahead. And what about the other papers?"

"I'd say we'll have to repeat the process with the ones that are allegedly from France", Alina pushed Erik slightly to the side, sifting through the papers. "They have to match each other. As for the American records, I would leave those - those are probably not originals. It makes more sense if some American officer in border control spelled his name wrong and everybody followed suit than if half of them were right and the other half wrong."

"To be fair, I don't think anybody would notice it either way", Jack chimed in.

"In any case, whatever you write on the application, that's how they'll keep it from now on, right?" Alina asked Jack, holding the empty form in her

hand.

"Keep what from now on?" Amelija yawned as she came out of the room behind her, still sleepy in a housedress with her hair down. She threw herself into the chair next to Erik's, then blinked a few times until she noticed Jack, and gasped audibly much to Alina's delight.

"I'm sorry, miss if I've woken you up", Jack said with genuine concern at Amelija's obvious panic. "We were just talking about some-"

"Some boring paperwork, nothing you want to hear about, I assure you", Erik said nonchalantly as he gathered the forged papers and stacked them neatly out of the way. He was not eager to find out how far Amelija's newfound trust went. Luckily for him, she was too busy being embarrassed to notice anything.

"I, uh", Amelija started. "I didn't know anybody would be here, or I would have dressed properly-"

"Coffee?" Alina said cheerfully as she passed her a cup. "You know, you'd better get used to it. This house is practically a train station, with how often people just barge in unannounced."

"Seventy percent of the time people mean Jack", Erik mumbled.

Alina looked over at Amelija whose face had "please barge in more often" practically written on it and coughed slightly, then turned to her darling. "I just remembered. I need you to come with me to Yana's house, she asked for our help with something."

"Now?" he frowned slightly under the mask.

"Yes, now. I can't wait, it's very important to her. We'll be back in a minute", she added at Amelija who was now staring at her looking bewildered and embarrassed for the first time in about ten years. Oh, to be a fly on this wall when they're left alone, Alina thought to herself with amusement as she closed the door behind her. I'd give a kingdom just to witness Amelija fumbling with the horrible realization that she does indeed have a heart.

As silence spread for a second, Amelija's mind started racing. However terribly Amelija struggled with her mortality, she would not let anyone see it for too long.

"You all must be really good friends, seeing as how you're treating one another's houses as your own", she smiled slightly, stirring her coffee. Amelija was used to having her pretty dresses and elaborate ringlets of hair perfectly tousled around her face, but she was doing quite well improvising in Alina's housedress with her hair resembling a bird's nest- at least, judging by Jack's half-amused, half-enchanted expression.

"Well, I guess we are. You might have to get used to seeing me around", he flashed her a smile. "I'm sure I can make it enjoyable for you."

Amelija rolled her eyes. "Sir, you might have to cover up your mouth. Your audacity is showing."

"I apologize with utmost sincerity, my lady Amelija", Jack drawled in an atrociously bad British accent, amusement wrinkling his eyes, "I would never dare to presume you'd like my company in the slightest I am mortified by my presumptuousness when I said I might be interesting to you. Of course, I am interested in a great many people, but perhaps your tastes are a little more refined."

Amelija wrinkled her nose slightly. "My tastes are more aligned with people who show me a little more respect."

"Sure", Jack said, getting up and taking his hat to leave, tipping it slightly before he put it on. "Respect is usually mutual, Miss, at least for people who respect themselves, and those of us who do rarely like to be crawling to get it from others. Maybe we'll be able to find some middle ground here, but for now, I won't be troubling you any longer. Please do not take my jokes to heart; I mean no offense by assuming you might enjoy my brash and unrefined company as I happened to enjoy yours until now."

After that, he left with a smile, politely closing the door with barely a sound and leaving Amelija to wonder what in the world just happened.

Meanwhile, as Alina was trying to get Piotr to finish his breakfast so Yana could get ready for work, she caught a glimpse of Erik looking at her from the corner.

"Hm?" she blinked at him. Piotr momentarily seized the opportunity and slid swiftly from the chair under the table where he kept his box of colorful wooden blocks. Alina sighed - she hated forcing children to do anything; perhaps it would be better if she tried again when he was hungrier.

"I'm just curious. Where did you learn how to forge a birth certificate?"

"I don't know how to forge birth certificates specifically", she admitted, "but I do know how to slightly change the wording on a document so that, for example, it might seem as if I'm old enough not to need my father's signature on my work contracts. And if the said signature was needed, well, I couldn't travel from London to Zagreb every single time, could I?"

"No, I suppose you could not", he covered his mouth with his hand not to laugh.

"And sometimes, some children arrive at orphanages and tell you some stories that make you wish they never, ever go back to where they came from, you know?" she glanced at Piotr carefully, picking her words so he wouldn't hear something that might traumatize him later. "And so, a few of us would sometimes go the extra step to make those children harder to find for whoever might be looking for them again." she shrugged. "All you need is a steady hand and someone to confirm your story, and soon the child has a new name and a chance to start again."

"You faked their documents so they couldn't be found?" Erik asked, frowning with surprise at that confession. "What if somebody had found out? You took a huge risk there, for someone in your situation."

"Somebody had to do something", she scoffed furiously. "Children from lower classes get bought and sold and used daily, was I supposed to just sit and let it happen? The other caretakers were thinking about it too, I was simply the one who came up with the plan. We didn't do it often enough to get noticed. Nobody ever found out; nobody ever talked about it, and no

child ever wanted to go back. We just made sure they couldn't be forced back."

"Nobody?" he bit his lip in thought. "Nobody talked? That's… unexpected."

As Erik was slowly pulling himself out of his moping, Amelija was coming dangerously close to falling into a pit of her own. She spent the rest of the day grumpy and as much as she pretended to maintain a calm exterior, it was very obvious to Alina that she was going through something as she grumpily picked at her food, grumpily refused to engage in conversation, and grumpily stared out the window in grumpy silence.

She was used to having people chase her, and she'd never really taken it as anything other than the natural order of things - she was young, beautiful, and wealthy; not to mention her charm and intelligence rarely left people indifferent. Since she was a teenager, potential suitors, lovers, and all kinds of suck-ups were drawn to her in droves; her usual tactic was to let them chase her and wait, biding her time until the feeble, the pretenders, and the sycophants tired out and the only ones remaining would be people patient enough to want to be her friends. Which wasn't that often - so Amelija lived that way for nearly ten years now, playing an endless game that kept her occupied and brought her passing entertainment, but never really made her feel connected to people the way she felt all those years ago when her sister and her cousins were by her side.

Bored in her little ice tower and surrounded by politeness and pretend, Amelija never really got herself into a situation where someone wanted her to put the same amount of effort - it would have been a huge embarrassment, in her traditionalist home, to show any kind of interest in a man too early, especially one of lower status who might have been just out to get her money and privileges. Amelija was never one to fall head over heels for the first person who showed her a little bit of attention. She was much smarter than that and proud of it.

That was before, and unfortunately, the strategy was failing her completely now, as she realized staring at the same page of a novel for an hour without reading a single sentence. Jack was either playing with her a much more sophisticated game of manipulation than she was able to handle, judging by

how quickly he got into her head - either that, or he was simply sincerely interested in her and felt offended when she tried to play hard to get.

She would have preferred the first option; the second one was terrifying. She wondered if she could ask Alina about her opinion on Jack, but decided against it for now. Every time she wanted to say something, pride would bite her tongue and she'd revert her gaze stubbornly back to her book.

Introspection was always a very tiring pastime for Amelija, so by night-time, she was already at her wits' end and desperate for a distraction when she noticed Alina had suddenly changed into a different set of clothes while she was deep in her thoughts, and was seemingly discussing something quietly with Erik. Alina spoke in a hushed voice, words passing too quickly for Amelija to understand; Erik looked at her with a sort of indecisive annoyance, only saying a word or two here and there. He then rubbed his temples, scratched his jaw, and gave a long sigh, nodding once. Amelija caught his gaze across the room and raised her eyebrows in question.

Erik gave Alina a long look, then switched his gaze over to Amelija again.

"We're going out. Would you like to come with us?" he asked flatly.

Amelija had already grabbed her hat and bag when she asked, "Come with you where?"

Erik gave a slow sigh. "I'll tell you on the way."

"You might want to change into something else", Alina pointed out. "This is not a proper dress to go out marauding at night."

"Excuse me, to go doing what now?"

"Just change. Take something of mine, as simple as you can find. And tie your hair." Alina spread her arms to show her own simple dark grey blouse and something that resembled a grey cotton skirt, but what was, upon closer inspection, a pair of very loose-fitting pants, similar to attire women sometimes wore while riding horses. Underneath them, Amelija could see the tips of sensible sturdy shoes.

"I'm getting a sort of feeling about this", she remarked. "Do you have any more of these trousers?"

Amelija had never changed her clothes with such alarming speed in her life - with Alina's help it took around ten minutes until they were done. Alina did have one more of those trousers, and even though they were a little too long and a little too tight on Amelija after she got used to having all her clothes sewn exactly for her, they were still practical enough. Amelija put her hair up in a bun and secured it with a tasteful, dainty net.

"I'm dying of curiosity now", she announced. Erik nodded at them, putting on his coat - a black hooded one, still almost ankle-length but much more breathable than a winter coat - and silently led the way across New York City.

"Where are we going, if it's not a surprise?" Alina asked curiously as they walked down from the ferry and across Manhattan. Much to Amelija's relief, at least her two companions were not insane enough to attempt walking all across New York; Amelija found it hard to keep up with their pace - she was not quite as fond of walking as Alina or Erik, and this was tiring her out.

"To church", he replied with a slight hint of mischief in his voice.

"Isn't this sort of a strange time to go?" Amelija asked.

"Don't you hate churches anyway?" Alina asked right after her.

"First of all, nobody is forcing you to go, and nobody will stop you if you want to go back", he narrowed his eyes at Amelija before turning to Alina. "We're not going to the mass. There's an abandoned church on a hill in the suburbs, and I wanted to see it from the inside."

"I have some questions about this", Amelija interrupted again, and Erik sighed.

"Amelija", Alina chimed in gently, "maybe let him tell the story from the beginning, yes?"

Amelija put her finger up to her mouth and crossed it twice, looking at Erik with angelic innocence.

"The church has been abandoned because that part of the suburb has been re-located, so to speak. They moved the people out to the new buildings in Lower Manhattan because it was cheaper than to install electricity, railroads, and plumbing over there, and make the settlement into a proper neighborhood", he explained. "The houses are also old, and a real fire hazard, because they were built sporadically by immigrants. The city is going to tear them down and build some factories; it's far enough that the fumes won't be as much of a problem for the city as they are now. Nobody should have been living there in the first place."

"And the church?"

"The church is currently locked down, with everything of value taken out. At least, everything that wasn't nailed to the floor. I don't know if they'll completely tear it down yet."

"Ah", Alina said. "It sounds interesting. I don't think I've ever seen an abandoned church from the inside."

"Will your God mind if you trespass into his house?" Erik asked with a tinge of sarcasm.

"I doubt it", Alina laughed. "There's more to this, isn't there? What are you not telling me?"

"There's something in the church that interests me."

"Wasn't everything of value taken out?" Amelija asked, finally breaking. "Are we going to steal those little postcards of the Virgin Mary?"

"We're not going to steal anything", Erik hissed before resuming his composure. "Besides, I didn't say everything was taken out. I said everything that wasn't nailed to the floor."

"Oh", Alina gasped. "Oh my God!"

Amelija blinked, then suddenly understood.

"We're stealing the church organ!"

"Absolutely not", Erik replied cheerfully. "I have no desire to personally peel every single pipe off the wall, and besides, how would we possibly take it home? When would I play it without attracting attention? It's the most impractical thing to steal in the world."

"So you have considered it", Alina laughed.

"Perhaps. In any case, I just wanted to try playing it, not steal it. I've played some keyboard instruments, including a pipe organ", he said. "Palais Garnier has one, but it's incredibly loud and it would have been too much of a risk to play it too often, so I only did it a few times altogether. I can play piano, but I haven't had a chance to play any keyboard instruments lately, aside from that piano we found in the basement of that Brooklyn theatre, and… and I've missed it." he turned to Alina carefully. "I've been meaning to ask. You've already gotten used to violin, so you wouldn't mind the sound of piano, do you?"

"No, of course. I'd love to hear you play the piano", Alina replied. "I'm not very good at it. I only know the songs I play for the school kids. But Amelija can play it quite well, as a proper accomplished lady", she looked over to Amelija, who looked at Erik with interest, who in turn looked straight ahead.

"I don't think I could fit a piano in our house, but I was considering saving up for a clavecin."

"A harpsichord. Or čembalo", Amelija chimed in helpfully. "That's lovely. I hear they're becoming fashionable again."

"I would be delighted if you did that", Alina smiled.

He looked at her with a slight glint in his eye. "I can be loud, you know. Even on a clavecin."

"By all means, please, rattle the stars. The more, the better."

"Can't say I haven't warned you", he smiled. "If that's true, your eternal hunger for chaos will be well-fed tonight. Whether I'm right about being able to play the organ or not, it's going to be loud."

"If I understood correctly, you are writing something to be performed here, in New York", Amelija said, trying to stir up some more conversation so she wouldn't think about how much she disliked walking long distances.

"I am", Erik replied, pulling up his collar. "I'm finishing it up."

"What's it like?" Amelija raised her eyebrows curiously.

"It's a symphony", he looked at her with slight annoyance. "As for what it's like, I don't know. It's what I felt like writing at that particular time. I have no idea if it's good, other than the fact someone might offer to perform it. If it's good enough once it's finished, that is."

"As if that's of any importance", Amelija scoffed. "Has every piece of music you've ever heard been incredibly good?"

"Well no-"

"Me neither. Some of it is boring, some of it is somewhat good, and only the very few are in any way remarkable. But they all have in common that I heard them. Not everything has to be a work of genius to reach people. Art is, among other things, a job like any other. And I don't always do my job perfectly, so I'd hardly expect the musicians, composers, stage managers, and critics to do the same."

Erik looked at her thoughtfully. "Since when are you so nonjudgmental? And, sorry, what is your job anyway?" The habit of asking basic things too bluntly and too long after getting to know someone wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

"I'm still extremely judgmental, thank you very much." Amelija grinned. "I manage our estate and finances in our father's name, while he plays a

politician and idealist. I'm surprised you didn't know already."

"And you're saying you don't always do it well?"

"No, as you can see, this summer I haven't been doing it at all."

"In any case", Erik shrugged his shoulders, careful not to move the hand Alina was holding too much (so she wouldn't think he wants to wiggle free and let go), "it's not the critics I'm too worried about. Everyone can be a critic, it's quite easy. I'm worried about what I will think about it when I finally hear it."

"Ah", Alina said next to him, "that's an interesting point. You might find that you've changed since it's been written." she paused for a second, looking at the evening star. "Still. I think it'll be worth it if only to pay tribute to the person you once were. We all could benefit from showing a little compassion to our past selves."

Alina could feel Erik squeeze her hand gently - she knew she'd struck a chord with something he needed to talk about, but there was no way he'd discuss it any further with someone else present. "Other than that, the only other thing that bothers me", he chuckled slightly, "have any of you ever seen professional musicians practicing a piece?"

Alina and Amelija both shook their heads in frighteningly coordinated unison.

"You can tell when they like what they're doing", Erik said. "You can hear it, too. I just - I'll lose my mind if I see them rehearsing and they have that dead, bored look in their eyes when they're doing something just to get paid."

The houses were getting sparse now, and as the road continued it started elevating slightly - indeed, they were on a gentle uphill climb to their destination. The suburb was more resembling a sparsely populated village, showing very few signs of still being populated. Some of the little houses had lights inside, and the road was still lit by street lamps - but it seemed

that most of its residents had either moved or were planning to do so soon. It was somehow too quiet.

The church that started coming out of the darkness ahead of them was small, old-looking, and covered in thick ivy vines and branches. It looked slightly eerie in the light of streetlamps - it was used until not long ago, but now it was locked, dark, and still as if waiting for something. The gate to the churchyard and the low stone wall around it still looked clean and untouched, and as they looked through the wide iron bars of the gate they were greeted with a somewhat strange sight.

The yard around it also had the feeling of something that was carefully kept until recently - the trees in the yard and the bushes were still neat and healthy; however tall summer grass had started to grow over the once-manicured lawn, leaving only the cobblestone paths untouched. It reached up to Alina's knees, but she could easily imagine it growing to her waist by the end of summer.

Amelija shivered a little at the sight of it. Alina looked at the wild overgrowth dominating the once-pristine and proper lawn with a sort of satisfied smile that amused Erik greatly as he glanced her way.

"Is it to your liking, Alina?" he asked, biting down a smile.

"I like places that look alive", she looked at him with a spark in her eyes as her hands firmly held onto the bars of the iron gate. "Besides, isn't it much less intimidating this way? I'm sure it was pretty before, but it looks more genuine this way. I wouldn't mind if all places of worship looked a little more… you know."

"Hm", he shrugged. "Am I safe to assume, then, you're not afraid to go inside?"

"Hah!" she turned to Amelija. "Are you scared?"

Amelija gave her an annoyed look and a long sigh. "It looks creepier than I expected, I'll admit."

"You don't have to go inside", Erik offered with almost no mockery in his tone - almost.

"Amelija, we'll go together", Alina said cheerfully. "Like when we were kids. So nothing can happen to us."

"Things did happen to us", Amelija waved an annoyed finger at her. "Dad got very angry with you, mom got very angry with me, we destroyed a lot of clothes, I still have a scar where I scraped my arm on a jagged plank, once you sprained your ankle, not to mention -"

"We're still alive, aren't we?"

"God protects children and fools", Amelija rolled her eyes. "Good thing we're still at least one of those things. Let's go before I change my mind."

Alina nodded, took a pin out of her pocket, and passed it to Erik, who unlocked the gate soundlessly. The two of them in front of Amelija moved so quietly that the only thing breaking the silence was a faint, barely-there rustling of tall grass against their jackets and trousers. Erik stopped in front of the church door, unlocking it just as carefully and opening it slightly in one slow and gentle movement to minimize the creaking. Alina entered the church first and Amelija followed suit as Erik closed the door behind her. It was suddenly clear why Alina insisted on bringing flat-toed shoes on this trip - not only would her heels have made it much easier to trip in the dark, but they would probably have made the characteristic clack-clack sound on the marble floor.

The church was barely lit by moonlight and street lights outside passed through stained-glass windows in mellow rays that ended on the stone floor. It was just enough to see their way through it without tripping or knocking something over. Most of the valuables were gone - the church still had piers and an altar but not much else; a bowl here or candleholder there, but it was clear by the muddy-looking metal that none of it was worth stealing. Alina turned around - some of the windows were broken from the outside with rocks that now lay on the floor, though not the painted ones - whoever threw the rocks was still too afraid to ruin the saints and virgin Mary that looked at her with seeming amusement from afar. The vines that covered

the outside of the church had just barely started to expand their growth to the inside of the walls, and the sight of it gave Alina a strangely eerie feeling she couldn't quite describe.

Alina looked up behind her and realized that the pipe organ on the balcony across the altar was, indeed, still in place.

"Wow", she said, and her voice echoed against the stone walls of the now-empty church. "Are we… certain that this can go unnoticed?"

"No", Erik said, looking up as well. "Not at all. What we need to focus on, this time is how to not get caught."

"Do you have a plan?"

"Sort of." he looked at her. "I can't hear anything while I'm playing, so I'll have to stop every once in a while to check if somebody's coming. I know how we can exit without being seen, but we'll have to move quickly and you'll have to follow my instructions carefully. And", he turned to Amelija, "don't panic. Keep calm. Panic will make you louder and more prone to mistakes. Just focus on what I tell you, if somebody comes, we'll be fine."

"Alright", Alina said. "We'll trust you. Now, would you like to try your hand at a real church organ?"

"Yes", Erik said, then jumped up, caught one of the balusters with his hands, and climbed directly onto the low balcony, completely ignoring perfectly usable stairs not five feet from him.

"Show-off", Alina said behind him as he stood on the balustrade.

He turned around, smiled at her, then disappeared into the shadows.

Alina took the perfectly usable stairs and climbed onto the balcony, leaning on the wall to see Erik playing; Amelija thought for a moment and sat on one of the piers, deciding to give them some privacy.

Erik wiped the dust off the stool and the keys and sat down soundlessly. After a moment's thought, he decided to keep his gloves on.

"Here it goes", he said with slight hesitation. "I might have to warm up a bit first - I know some etudes and variations I could play - I haven't had many chances to play in the past year and a half."

"Whatever you'd like," Alina said, looking away to make him less nervous. "We have all night if need be."

"Right. Well." he sighed and cracked his fingers, and started.

The first chord was incredibly loud in the silent abandoned church, and all three of them jumped up immediately.

"Oops", he said. "I might have to adjust some things. Give me a minute." Alina couldn't see what he was doing, but when he started again, it sounded much gentler and softer than the first time. Erik played some plain, boring etudes just to get his fingers used to the feeling of keys again, and paused when he finally felt confident enough to start.

"Lovely", Alina chirped from her corner. "You do know how to make even scales sound lovely. Don't stop."

"Alright, let's see what I can do here." his mind registered her praise, but he was focused on playing now. The organ had massive potential; he was pleasantly surprised to find such an instrument in this small abandoned church on the outskirts. Unfortunately, he couldn't exactly do whatever he wanted for fear of attracting too much attention, so he settled for a few soft, soothing improvisations that resembled old gregorian chants. Alina and Amelija sat silently and unmovingly while he played, careful not to disturb him.

"Hmm", he commented. "Not bad."

"It sounds so haunting", Alina commented. "I like it very much."

"Gregorian chants are usually like that. They don't follow the form we know in modern music - so it sounds a lot more unpredictable, and slightly unreal - like a stream of water running through a cave, so to speak. They're usually performed by acapella choirs - but I thought, the organ is a woodwind

instrument, after all, it was worth experimenting", he remarked, not looking up.

"You said it better than I could", Alina smiled.

"It's still not exactly what I wanted to do here", he frowned slightly. "I'm running out of inspiration."

Trying again, he played a sweet little melody he thought Alina might like; it was what he usually did when he couldn't think of anything to play but felt he had to practice. It wasn't particularly good - this organ was not meant to be played for sweet and soft romantic tunes, and Erik in particular was playing it for the first time, so the effect was not quite satisfying to him.

As he finished, a pebble flew from behind him and hit the pipe a few feet from his head, making an annoying clank sound - not close enough to startle him, but close enough to annoy him.

"Boring!" Amelija remarked behind him. "I didn't come all the way here to take a nap!"

Erik turned around to face her with an expression so furious she could see it even through the mask, and she grinned a sharp defiant grin back at him.

"You'd like to be entertained?" he asked flatly. Amelija had heard that tone of voice before, but this time his hands weren't twitching. She wasn't afraid.

"God, I would" she sighed prettily. "Alina said you should rattle the stars, and I don't feel any kind of rattling!"

Erik kept his gaze fixed on Amelija as he slammed his fingers on the keys to the first chords to Toccata and Fugue. The effect was instantaneous - dust flew off the pipes, the whole church vibrated and walls shook, and Amelija stumbled in surprise, almost falling.

"Yes!" she raised her arms. "Exactly!"

He shot her one more look with the piercing yellow of his eyes, reminding Amelija of lightning that broke out of the sky with summer storms, and

turned around. He played a few more bars, right until the short pause, and stopped again.

"Are you having second thoughts?" Amelija yelled at him as she walked down the aisle toward him with her arms spread wide. "I'm not afraid. Why are you afraid?"

"I don't remember the whole thing by heart", he laughed a deep, uncharacteristically confident laugh as he looked over at Alina who could barely stifle her laughter at the scene unfolding in front of her. "This is somewhat embarrassing."

"I don't care, play whatever you want! Just spare me of this silly shyness!" Amelija yelled again from behind him. "You're the last person playing this organ before they take it apart! Give it a proper requiem before it dies, or don't bother at all!"

Erik took off his gloves and threw them furiously on the ground next to him as he yelled back, "Fine!"

Alina barely had time to stand up from the stool she had been sitting on as he started - if she had waited a moment more, he would have probably accidentally knocked her over; he suddenly threw his arms wholeheartedly at the keyboards playing another impossible chord that rattled the entire church. Alina felt the very ribs vibrating in her chest as she stumbled away, laughing, and down from the balcony to evade the thunderously loud music.

Behind her, she could barely make out Amelija laughing again as well.

"Great!" Amelija exclaimed, walking towards them with her eyes sparkling. The old organ roared as Erik played it, paying no mind to the dissonance or the volume. The thundering, aggressive chords he held for a second too long would give way to a dark, enchanting melody before resuming their rage once again.

Amelija laughed, running up to Alina who stared in enchanted, bewitched, entranced silence. Alina shook as Amelija took her hands, breaking the spell, and twirled her around.

"Dance!" Amelija yelled, barely audible against the organ. But Erik seemed to have heard her, and he changed the rhythm to a more bearable one, something that would have been a waltz if it wasn't so close to a funeral march. Alina laughed back, accepting Amelija's hands; she put her arm around Amelija's waist and intertwined their remaining hands, spinning around the aisle in some dark, morbid version of ballroom dance.

Erik would probably have been amused at the scene if he wasn't completely, singularly focused on what he was doing. The old, forgotten organ strained to match the fury he put into his playing, giving its final swan song before it was left for good. Erik modulated the key and focused inward again - felt the old instrument's pain as it thundered through the church, its anger at being left behind to rot and taken into pieces that no longer held its spirit and power. He thought he could hear the ghosts from the cemetery rise to listen, see their pale forms in the corner of his eye as they awoke, and slowly joined in to listen. He eased up the tempo and quieted down a bit, careful not to upset them.

You are not forgotten.

I'm here, and I hear you.

He brushed over the keys gently while rays of moonlight spilled through the clouds and the stained glass windows illuminating his long, pale fingers. Alina and Amelija stood still behind him on the stairs, unable to see the ghosts but somehow aware of their presence. Alina's gaze fixed on the flying strands of his black hair and his narrow shoulders that moved with every note, and as Amelija turned to look at her, she could see such ardent and sincere adoration she hadn't seen on a human being before.

You should rest.

Wherever you're going, be at peace.

The song slowed down to a mellow, melancholic weep that promised to carry the old church's memories long after it was over, drawing out the last few notes in some strange harmony that human ears were not meant to hear. Erik stopped playing and sat still, deep in thought for a moment.

He then turned to Alina and Amelija, looking at Alina for a moment with the same adoring expression that matched her own.

Then his eyes widened, and he stood up immediately grabbing his gloves. Before the women could say anything, he had already crossed over to them and put a finger to his lips, signaling for them to keep silent.

"Someone's found us", he whispered. "Follow me, and be as quiet as you can."

Erik grabbed Alina's hand, and Alina grabbed Amelija, as they stumbled through the church. He opened a door to a small passage behind the altar and urged them both inside, following close behind. He crouched to look through the dusty keyhole at the scene unfolding.

Outside, they could hear confused and irritated voices of people - police, most likely - who searched around for the source of the noise. They would surely come and search this room too, but for now, they were doing the obvious thing - approaching the shallow pit where the organ was, arguing as they held their candles high.

Good.

Erik turned to them, talking almost inaudibly. "When I tell you, you both run out and continue running until you reach the back entrance, then get out and meet me at the back of the yard next to the tree where we came in. No matter who calls you, don't look back and don't stop. Understood?"

They both nodded in unison. Alina whispered, "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to create a little diversion." he smiled. "Don't worry. They can't catch me, they won't even see me."

"Alright."

He looked through the keyhole again. "Now", he whispered, opening the door and shoving them outside. Alina ran, quickly and quietly, like she was already used to this sort of thing while dragging Amelija by the hand - and

Amelija followed as best as she could, not at all used to this sort of thing. They reached the back entrance in absolute panic as Alina opened the door quickly, then continued running through the churchyard, jumping over smaller bushes and stumbling through the unkempt grass. Amelija let out a little chuckle - she was scared out of her mind, but something about this made her blood boil and as she reached the tree she was halfway through a state of euphoria. She joined Alina, leaning on the tree and heaving as they waited for Erik to come.

Inside the church, as soon as Alina and Amelija had run out of the room, Erik ran in the opposite direction, knocking over a candle holder that clanked loudly and distracted the policemen. He kept to the shadows as he made his way along the walls, only occasionally stepping into the light to indicate his position.

The policemen tried following him, but they could barely process what they were seeing in the dim light. Erik stood in front of one of the elevated balconies that looked at the altar, then jumped in a moment of inspiration and scaled the wall, holding himself up on the banister. His face was buried deep in his collar and hood - nobody would be able to see that he was wearing a mask under this low light - and so, as he stood balancing on the edge of the banister, he turned around and looked at the four large men directly in the eye. All they could see was a tall hooded shadow looming over them bathed in pale moonlight that barely passed through the dusty windows.

The policemen froze, expecting an attack, but he only stood for a second before he turned around again. He climbed higher along the wall until he reached one of the broken windows. Wrapping his arm and hand in the lapel of his cloak, he smashed the remaining glass to widen the hole, then quickly pushed himself through the opening. The large growth of vines on the other side partly supported his weight - barely, but it did - as he climbed down stepping into cracks and bumps on the wall. It wasn't particularly high in the first place, only a few meters above the ground; but he didn't know what would be waiting on the ground and didn't want to risk breaking his leg if he slipped or fell into a hole. The policemen were just starting to exit

through the main entrance when he jumped down and started running towards the tall tree in the back.

Alina and Amelija had only been waiting a minute, and they shot up immediately as they saw him. He waved his hand for them to start climbing - Alina grabbed the nearest branch and was over the wall in mere seconds. Amelija was so tired from the physical strain that her hands were already shaking. She struggled more and nearly fell, unable to grip the branches properly.

With adrenaline pulsing through his veins, Erik jumped and gripped the flat top of the wall, bouncing off and propping himself up on his elbows. He stood on the wall, then jumped over onto the tree and grabbed both of Amelija's arms, pulling her up instantly. She took the hint and helped him, scratching the trunk with her feet. Before she could process what happened, he had somehow carried her over and pushed her down the wall, where she landed with a little more rattle in her bones than she would have liked.

Alina watched the scene in panic and as Erik followed down, she immediately pointed silently at the nearest building with a fire escape - they climbed up some more, up the stairs to the top, then finally collapsed on the empty roof terrace, breathing heavily.

"That was exciting", Amelija remarked as they all lay on their backs looking at the stars. "I'll admit, you two are not boring at all."

"Is everyone alright?" Alina propped herself up on her elbow.

"I scratched my knees, and your pants are ruined, but otherwise yes", Amelija shrugged.

"Erik?"

"Well, don't panic now", he drew out lazily. "I'm bleeding."

"What-"

"I decided for a more, ah, dramatic escape route, but it was worth it. I just picked up a few pieces of glass on my way", he said as he plucked the glass out of his coat. "I nicked my knuckles a little. I didn't notice it until now."

"Are you-"

"I'm alright. Don't worry", he looked over at her gently, holding his hand up. "Look, they're just scratches. I had worse back when we renovated the house. Don't be upset."

"Whatever you say", Alina replied, slightly upset. His hand was more than a little scratched, but seeing that it didn't look dangerous, she didn't feel like arguing. Erik's reckless abandon when it came to his own physical body was more than a little tiring at times.

"Amelija", he looked over to her, calling her by her name for the first time. "I have to say, you're not boring either."

"Thank you", Amelija raised her eyebrows. They frowned at each other for a moment before Amelija finally broke into laughter.

"Alina, by God, fine", she said. "He's great. You have my blessing."

"I knew that already", Alina purred with satisfaction. Sun was starting to rise behind her, illuminating the wisps of brown hair floating around her head. If Erik was to be completely honest, he'd say it looked a little bit like a halo.

Chapter 30:Steps

Erik found himself a harpsichord alarmingly fast after that night; so fast that Alina was willing to bet he had one already picked out and had been pining over it for a while before he asked her about it because it was barely over a week later that it arrived. The delivery men left it in a box in front of their house as Erik asked them not to come inside, and so he and Jack had to carry it inside by themselves. Jack didn't mind- he was hoping to see Amelija again, but too proud to reach out to her; this was a welcome excuse to hang around without admitting anything. Yana watched them with curiosity from her window, propped up on her elbows. With the shawl over her hair, she looked like an old granny that specialized in spying on her neighbors.

"What you have there?" she asked. "рояль?" the last time she saw one was on the ship to America; she was dying to hear what kind of new noise would start coming from her neighbors' house now.

"Close, but smaller and with two keyboards. клавесин", Erik replied as he looked behind him not to scratch the box it was in against the doorframe. "Do you want to take a look?"

"Sure, I'll come by in a minute. You'll share your new toy with Piotr?"

"Of course. As long as he behaves", Erik's voice sounded from inside the house. "Lift it a little, Jack."

"I'm trying to", he groaned. "It's hard to grip it properly."

"Where's your upper body strength? Didn't you say you used to fight?"

"Yes, and I will gladly prove it to you if you keep messing with me-"

"Over there", Erik shook his head at the empty corner of the room. "Just lower it gently."

They managed to push it neatly to the corner, and Erik took it out of the box and set the body on the legs as Jack watched, unsure if his help was still needed. Then, Erik brought in the stool as well and set it carefully in front of the harpsichord. It was a small one, but it still looked big in their little house; Alina had helped him carefully rearrange things in the small room so that it would fit - and it did, although it took them most of the night. The sides of the harpsichord had ornate wooden inlays and the lid was carefully painted in swirling geometrical patterns of muted blue and gold. Erik couldn't imagine who in the world managed to get the exact shade of blue paint to match well with the brown wood, but the result was magnificent.

"Okay. Do you need anything else?" Jack asked, turning around. Alina and Amelija seemed nowhere in sight, and he wasn't going to just wait around pathetically until they came back.

Erik turned to face him with a very childish smile plastered across his masked face. "It's very beautiful, isn't it?"

"I suppose", Jack shrugged, unsure what was going on. "I mean, it is fairly cute. Like a shrunk-down piano."

Erik pulled the lid up. "It's not a piano! And it has two manual keyboards!"

"I see", Jack rubbed his chin. "I should have guessed just one wouldn't be enough for you."

"The little chair is painted in matching colors!" he pointed out. "It's not very noticeable, but I prefer it this way. I think it's very subtle, and Alina is sure to like it." He tapped his fingers against the keys, making a few tentative sounds. "The timbre of the sound is so sweet, too, very baroque. I like when they have that buzzing sound, it adds character. It has a lute stop! It can sound like a lute if you press this button!"

"What is going on?" Jack scratched his head. "Is this the first time you see a piano?"

"Not a piano!" Erik clasped his hands together in joy. "But this is the first time I've bought an instrument with my own money, for myself, and put it in my house!"

"Oh", Jack managed. "Oh, I see." he couldn't remember seeing Erik so happy before; as a matter of fact, he couldn't remember seeing the such innocent joy in someone's eyes since he was a kid.

"It's perfect! Look at it!" Erik waved his hand at the harpsichord. "Such a perfect little… thing!"

"It's positively endearing", Jack agreed politely. "That's a big milestone you've hit, then."

"A big what?" Erik barely tore his eyes away from the little not-piano.

"Milestone. As in, a big life event. Meaningful."

"Oh, yes. Now that you said it, yes I think so." he scratched at his temple. "I'm not sure what to do with that fact. I mean, it's exciting, yes."

"Isn't your birthday soon as well?"

"My birthday is a date you randomly picked so that my documents wouldn't be incomplete", Erik pointed out. "I've no idea why you thought I was born in July, but I don't care either way."

"It was your sunny disposition."

"Ah, that one. Alright. How could I possibly forget."

"In any case", Jack shrugged, "it's your twenty-ninth birthday, and you've bought yourself a gift. Congratulations. You have your own house, a great woman, and now a harpsichord to finish the symphony you might soon see performed. You're doing something right."

Erik stood there wordlessly, obviously uneasy.

"I- I suppose it all happened gradually and I never noticed it", he managed. "I, um. I don't know what to say." he had plenty of things to say and plenty of feelings, but they weren't something he'd just unleash in front of Jack, normally.

Jack shrugged. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"And you made all of it possible, didn't you?" Erik asked. "Have I ever even thanked you?"

"For helping you move a piano? Don't worry, that's a very common thing for friends to do, although it usually involves furniture and not pianos."

"This isn't a piano, either."

"Sure. It just looks like a piano and sounds like a piano."

"Listen to me", Erik clasped his hands again like in a prayer. "It does not sound like a piano. Secondly, I wanted to thank you for other things. It's because of you that we were able to build that park, it's because of you that I might become a full citizen and it's because of you that I met Heidel - and I just, well, thank you."

"No problem", Jack waved his hand. "It's what friends do like I said." Erik looked at him for a second, unsure what else to say - words seemed very lacking, and what's more, Jack didn't seem like he enjoyed melodramatic gestures of gratitude.

"In any case", Erik continued, "I've thought about what you asked - I'll try to arrange it so that you can see Amelija. Although, she's a handful so you might want to reconsider that."

"I already have", Jack lied smoothly, looking at the harpsichord. "I might have spoken too soon. I'm not that interested. Well, are you going to play this not-a-piano at all? Or do we need a drink first?"

ooo

"Hey, Jack!" Alina waved with feigned innocence as she walked down the street from the post office to her house with Amelija by her side. Jack pretended to have just noticed them, then crossed the street and approached, tipping his hat.

"Are you leaving already?" she asked. "How come?"

"You brave dragon-knight added a small not-a-piano to his hoard", he nodded in the direction of their house. "A harpsichord, but it's really funny when you call it a piano in front of him and he has to compulsively correct you. Anyway, we had a drink to celebrate, but I left because he said he has a lot of work to do before he sees Heidel again. I thought he might want to be alone."

"Alone alone?"

"No, I think he might want you to be there. He's processing some things."

"Alright", Alina turned to her sister. "Um-"

"I'll find a way to entertain myself", she gave her a slightly sour smile. Amelija and Jack had not even looked at each other directly since the conversation started - but Amelija couldn't help but notice his wavy hair was a little less messy than usual, and his suit neatly pressed. She wondered if he was seeing someone important.

"Absolutely not. Jack", Alina announced in a fake-commanding tone, "as my friend, you absolutely must keep my sister company. It would be completely barbaric of us all if we just left our guest, my blood, on her own in a foreign country." she was talking loudly enough to be heard by other people in the street (which there weren't many of, and they didn't seem interested at all, but it still unnerved Amelija).

"Alina-" Amelija warned.

"Amelija, as your older sister, I must ask you to be quiet. I know you're an honest woman, and I know how you hate being lonely, so don't be so coy! Jack is a man of great character, and I trust him fully to watch over you for

the next few hours. Now, if you will excuse me, my darling is waiting", she curtsied very elegantly and hurried off.

You goddamn manipulative bitch, Amelija fumed as she turned to Jack, whose sour expression mirrored her own.

"Miss, I have no idea what your sister is cooking up, but you seem capable of looking after yourself. I know you're not a teenage girl who needs a chaperone- you're free to go wherever you please, and if you want, I can tell Alina I went with you." Jack put his hands in his pockets as he rambled, but didn't budge to leave.

Amelija narrowed her eyes at him, unable to discern if he was mocking her, dismissing her, or trying to be helpful. "Excuse me?"

"Well, you're an adult. Don't let them pressure you into anything." Jack shrugged. He was still standing in his spot, unmoving, with his hands in his pockets.

"How very kind of you", Amelija bared her teeth in what looked like a smile but was nothing of the sort.

Jack shrugged. "Later, then. Have fun." he finally turned around on his heel and started walking away.

"Actually", Amelija called after him and he immediately stopped. "I have a question."

"Yes?" he turned back in one very swift motion, his hands behind his back.

"I need to get myself some new books", she explained. "Do you happen to know a good bookstore or a public library nearby?"

"What kind of books?" he scratched his chin.

"Non-fiction. I need books on mathematics and physics." she lifted her chin, waiting for his comment, and sure enough-

"Oh, wow. For yourself?" he raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Yes", she purred. "What of it?"

"Hmm", he decided that question would be better left unanswered. "I know bookstores nearby, but I've never really looked for that sort of book. They're not my favorite reading material."

"Well, it's worth trying", Amelija concluded. "Where?"

"There's one two blocks away from my house", he pointed. "That way. I'm going there as well, I can show you."

"Alright, thank you", she smiled politely and followed next to him.

Followed next to him in uncomfortable, apologetic silence, that is. Amelija wondered when she lost her ability to charm and talk people into getting over conflicts smoothly; she had a feeling it wouldn't work on this man and was feeling slightly lost.

"I don't mean to be rude", Jack finally broke, "but I'm curious. Why are you studying the most boring, grueling subjects on your vacation?"

"Well, first of all, they are neither boring nor hard for me. Secondly, Alina asked me to check Walter's progress here and there because he's getting to a level that's hard for her to follow, seeing as she has other work to do", she sighed. "Besides, it's not like I'm occupied. I don't go out much here without Alina - I only know her friends, and they all have very particular ideas of fun. I haven't gotten many party invitations since I've arrived", she chuckled. "Maybe when Nikola arrives, our cousin, he might nudge her to go out into society a little more."

"Good luck with that", Jack commented. "I've tried inviting them both over a few times when I had other guests - a party of sorts - but neither of them wanted to come. Alina's quite chirpy around other people these days, but surprisingly, she just doesn't like parties."

"I think Alina sometimes avoids places where she's supposed to have fun", Amelija giggled. "She prefers fun that's forbidden. She's always been like

that. She once told me that the pressure of having fun takes all the fun out of it."

"And you?" Jack turned to her.

"Oh, I like all kinds of fun. You never know. It always surprises me."

"Right. Noted", Jack smiled and opened his mouth as if he wanted to add something, then changed his mind. "This bookstore I told you about, it's over there."

ooo

"Hello, darling", Alina entered the house to see Erik already sitting by the harpsichord, playing something she vaguely recognized. She went up to him to read the title on the sheet music. "Is that Bach?"

"Yes, these are some etudes for practice," he replied without stopping. "And the Goldberg Variations for later."

"I think I played some of these as a child. Well, not this one, it's quite difficult", she remarked. "Sorry, I'll let you finish."

Erik nodded, mumbled a word of thanks, and continued playing. He went through the etudes carefully and methodically - yes, they were mostly mind-numbingly boring, but that was intentional. He let his mind wander, focusing only on how his fingers felt against the keys; the occasional unwanted twitch over otherwise smooth motions that betrayed his lack of practice in recent years. It was almost meditative, playing something so easy he knew it by heart, and there was something very soothing to it. This is alright, they seemed to say. You're struggling, but it's alright to struggle. Your fingers are like wooden sticks and you're making mistakes, but you already did this once, as a child - and you succeeded; you will succeed again. There is no emotional stake if you mess this up - it's just a playground to practice on. The real world will wait until you're finished.

When he stopped and turned to Alina, she was curled up comfortably in her armchair.

"Lovely", she said. "How come you're playing etudes?"

"I tried playing some things I played back in Paris, but it wasn't good", he shook his head. "It sounded nothing like before. I'm out of practice. My fingers need to adjust to keyboards. So I started with something easier - I'm sorry, you might have to listen to some boring music for a while until I get back to how I was."

"It sounds to me like they're adjusting rather quickly", she said. "You're aware that most people can't hear the difference, right?"

"Not most people, but Heidel will", he said. "I'd like to write some of the symphonies as a piano score so I can play it when I go to him again. I think he'll understand it better when he hears it." he paused. "Anyway, do you like it?"

Alina obediently got up to take a good look at the harpsichord. "Oh my god." she covered her hands with her mouth.

"Yes?"

"This has got to be the cutest thing I have ever laid my eyes on", she turned around to look at it from all sides. "Oh my god. It's so colorful. It's like a tiny little -"

"If you say piano, I'm taking it back."

"Tiny little harpsichord, I know, it just looks like- khm." she bit down a laugh. "It's adorable, I love it! And it sounds so sweet!"

"Right?" his face lit up. "And the keys are so light when you press on them - it's incredibly delicate! Do you want to try it?"

"Well, I might." Alina sat down next to him. She was slightly self-conscious; she knew she wasn't a musician by any standards, but Erik just smiled and nodded at her.

"Go ahead, play whatever you wish, just to try it out."

She played a simple little lullaby they taught her as a child, and he was right - the keys were light, and the sound it produced was sweet, quieter but slightly sharper than a piano would sound.

"Oh my god even the keys are adorable-" she put her hands on her cheeks again.

"-yes, and there's-"

"Two keyboards!" she laughed. "Wasn't one enough?"

"Well, technically", he shrugged, looking somewhat guilty. "Technically it would be enough, yes. They aren't necessary, but I found it fascinating - look, if you push this lever, you can play one key, and the one above it is pressed automatically. If you pull it, then all the keys are pressed separately, so you have more control and range." he shrugged. "I was originally considering a small vertical piano. It would fit inside the house better, and it's more practical. I admit, I saw this and let it get the better of me. It was a completely impulsive decision."

"Oh, but if you had passed by this thing without buying it, I would never have forgiven you!" she laughed. "Look at it! It's perfect! You're allowed to have one ridiculously perfect thing for yourself, for god's sake!"

"Just one? Then I'm over my quota now", he smiled. "You're also in this house."

"Well, then I might have to go. It would be a crime to stand between you and this adorable little pia-" her voice got suddenly muffled by Erik's hand on her mouth, as he wrapped his other arm around her, hugging her to him tightly.

"Listen", he whispered confidentially, smiling with his face only an inch away from hers. "If you finish that word, and the word is piano, I will crumble into ash right in this instant. You're killing me."

Alina batted her eyelashes innocently.

"If I let you go, do you promise not to break my heart like this anymore?" he asked.

Alina nodded. Her mouth was still covered by his hand, but her eyes were wrinkled in an obvious snicker.

"Fine", he slowly lowered his hand from her mouth. His other arm he kept wrapped around her waist.

"Impressive", he remarked after a few seconds of Alina watching him silently, trying her best not to laugh. "I was certain you'd shout "piano" at the top of your lungs immediately."

"I'll mess with you later, don't worry. You look so very happy today", she smiled at him, lifting her hand to trace lightly along his masked cheek with the tips of her fingers.

"I am", he closed his eyes, leaning into her hand. "It has been brought to my attention that I have everything I ever wanted."

"You do?" Alina's fingers moved on to his hair, running through it gently.

"Yes. I've had it all along, but I was worried about losing it so much I forgot to pay attention", he leaned his head toward hers. "You are everything I ever wanted. I loved you when we met and I only had a fraction of my heart left to feel anything, and I love you now with every single new piece you've added to it since."

"Darling", she rested her head against his shoulder, and Erik wrapped his arms more tightly around her. "I love you too, so very much. You will never lose me."

"I wrote that symphony for you", Erik admitted finally, after keeping it inside for months. "I started it last summer, after that- that night. I was trapped at home, trapped in my head, and I had so many things to say to you, but no way of saying them - and that's how it started. You'll understand once you hear it. I wanted to tell you I loved you, but I was too scared, so I decided I'd one day give you this symphony."

"Your heart is the most precious gift I have in my life", Alina smiled. "But this symphony is the close second."

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"I nearly forgot", after what seemed like an eternity Alina got up to rummage through her little bag, "We stopped by the post office, and some letters arrived. I thought you might be interested."

To my dearest cousin,

I'm continuously amazed at how fast your and Amelija's letters are reaching me in this country. The Yankees' postal service is something! Yes, I'm still in Pittsburgh. Croatian Federation is treating me like a king; you'll never see a bunch of our people get along so well as when they are among foreigners, especially when someone brings them really good liquor from the homeland. I've made some really good friends, but now I'm eager to get away and into the wilderness. I've lingered close by in case Amelija might want to change her mind and go with me, but it seems that she's quite happy.

This brings me to my point - I was a bit worried for her, but judging by her letters she's happy with you there and would like to see you as much as possible before we have to go. It's all the same to me; I have no desire to go back before September. She's made some tentative hints to the fact she'd like to stay, and that you would be alright with it, and I'm perfectly fine with not dragging her along all across Canada. It's not her style to be trudging through mud with me in search of endemic species; if you're alright with her being there all summer, so am I.

However, if anything happens and she can't stay with you anymore, send her to the address I've written on the other side of this page. The people in the Croatian Federation will take good care of her if need be, I've made sure of that, but they're not so stuck up that they would watch her every step. She won't be bored at all. I know she doesn't need a chaperone, but I'll be much calmer if she has a place to sleep with people she can count on, wherever that is.

I'm glad Amelija is having fun with you. To be honest, she wasn't quite herself for a while after you left; she kept blaming herself but you'll never hear it from her, so don't mention I said it. Just remember that she does have feelings and loves you very much even though she doesn't act like it.

I've also got a letter for your darling, and I'd like you to give it directly to him. I know you'll probably read it since you're insufferably nosy, but I don't mind. I just want him to get it, along with my address.

Well, now we've settled that, I hope you're happy as well, in your little wild godless household. Good to see you've finally found a man who can handle you. I'll drop by to visit you after I'm back, and I'd like to meet him as well. He sounds like he's not boring.

Love,

Nikola.

Alina read the whole letter out loud to him, then passed him a small piece of paper.

"Did you read it?" he asked in amusement.

"I may have skimmed it", she rolled her eyes. "Sorry."

To Mr. Erik Giry,

As Alina has probably mentioned to you, she and Amelija have asked me to allow for Amelija's visit to continue until we're set to go back to Europe, in September. While they're assuring me they've asked you and you've already given your permission, I'm aware that they can get a bit carried away when they want something. Alina and Amelija have been inseparable since they were little; it makes me very happy to see them together again.

That being said, you're still the head of the house

"Excuse me?" he stopped. "I wasn't aware this house had a head, let alone that it was mine. What is this nonsense?"

"It's just traditionalist pandering", Alina shrugged. "He thinks he has to do it, Nikola isn't like that when you meet him. But he means well. Read it."

That being said, you're still head of the house and you're also living with them, so out of respect, I wanted to ask you directly. It seems to me that Amelija has been very happy with you both, and I'd like to express my gratitude for giving her such a warm welcome. If you're alright with her staying longer, I'm alright with it as well. If not, I've provided an address where she can stay until I'm back from Canada.

I'd also like to wish you all the best. Alina seems to be very happy with you, and I'm looking forward to finally meeting you.

Kind regards,

Nikola pl. Boričević.

"Alright?" Erik frowned at her. "And now?"

"Now you just write him back and tell him if you're alright with her staying or not. There isn't that much to it."

"If you say so", he scribbled something on the back of the note. "How's this?"

To Mr. Nikola pl. Boričević,

She can stay. Just don't forget to pick her up before you leave; we'll wrap her nicely so that you can carry her without fuss.

Erik Giry (head of the house)

Alina looked at the paper for a moment before her shoulders started shaking; she fought a valiant internal battle for a few moments before she burst into uncontrolled laughter.

"Nikola is going to adore you", she wiped the tears from her eyes. "Still, you can't say that in a letter. He can't know if you're joking or not."

"What does he want me to say?" Erik rolled his eyes. "She's not my child, I don't want responsibility for her. She does what she wants."

"Just write something neutral. You can be yourself when you meet him. Nikola isn't like that, you know - his part of the family is so stuck up, strict and traditional, but he's the black sheep among them. He's a bohemian deep down, and he never really fits in with them, but he always assumes everyone else is like his family and so he writes these formal letters and always acts unnecessarily posh with people he doesn't know. The three of us always used to cover for each other when there was some mischief - and let me tell you, Nikola is capable of some very much scandalous mischief."

"Hmm", he stood up, folding the paper before he put it in his pocket. "I'll think of something. But I'd like to go to Heidel first - I can't focus on this right now."

"I'm afraid that wouldn't work", Alina shook her head.

"Why?"

"Nikola wants to leave soon, and you won't be seeing Heidel for another week, so if you send him a letter then it won't reach him on time. And he will either have to stay longer or be worried about it all summer."

Erik sighed with obvious annoyance.

"Correspondence is usually somewhat quicker than writing to Paris from New York", Alina nudged him. "Listen, Nikola is nice. Just write a simple "yes" or "no" and send it to him."

"Fine. I'll do it tonight."

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Good afternoon. I have a meeting with maestro Heidel.

Good afternoon. I've been invited here for a meeting with maestro Heidel.

Good afternoon. Maestro Heidel is expecting me.

Good afternoon. Is Fritz Heidel here? He told me to meet him here.

Oh, to hell with it.

Erik rehearsed the words over and over again in his head as he walked across midtown Manhattan until he reached his destination. The Conservatory was a huge building - at least it seemed that way to him, as he looked at it from below. It was not that big for New York's standards, and certainly not as intimidating as other institutes devoted to higher musical education that he'd encountered so far. It was rather simple and unpretentious.

The National Conservatory of Music was a relatively new institution; founded only ten years ago by a wealthy patroness and radical in its approach to inclusivity and availability. The Conservatory included classes that were available for students without formal education; it awarded scholarships including those meant for women, some minorities, and various physically disabled students. Erik, in his rather extensive research of New York's music venues and schools, found that institutions like this one were quite rare - music was, even in the New World, mostly still a luxury only available to the privileged few - and if he were personally asked to pick one place he would feel comfortable coming to and sharing his music, it would have probably been this one. Even Alina, having heard of the owner's ardent activism against inequality and human rights from the papers, urged him on various occasions to at least consider starting there.

Except he wasn't personally asked. Heidel just happened to work there, having joined after Dvorak left his director's position to go back home to Bohemia, and the Conservatory found itself in dire need of someone to take over the workload before the new director was chosen. Heidel still worked as a conductor in the Philharmonic Orchestra, and this move - which was sure to cost him a great deal of time and not bring forth a lot of monetary rewards - was seen as somewhat eccentric.

Erik had never considered himself one of the privileged few that the higher musical circles deemed "worthy" of educating or listening to, and he had over the years made peace with that fact. He was well aware that he, with his brand new name and absolutely no formal education (as well as the

certain detail on his head he couldn't ever forget) was not quite welcome among the respectable. He had watched Heidel from afar and while Heidel had Erik's respect, Erik was quite sure the feeling wouldn't go both ways - that is, until Heidel recently decided to join this new, not-quite-profitable, radical institution and devote a good part of his precious time that used to go to the more respectable Academy to teach students that sometimes joined in almost literally from the street. Erik was not brave enough to guess at Heidel's motivation, and he was not brave enough to announce this, yes, I've found a place that would accept me - but this particular school's blatant disregard for traditional worldviews was so tempting to him that he couldn't just stay away after he was so explicitly, well, literally invited.

He took another deep breath as he adjusted the stack of neatly-bound papers in a hardback folder under his arm.

Maybe Heidel was a different kind of man underneath the pompous condescension, he thought - as students exited the building after a long day of work, he watched them realize they didn't look like arrogant little rich boys he normally saw in front of the Philharmonic. There were women, yes, there were minorities (although one was very obviously absent), teenagers, and Erik saw in the corner of his eye a young girl in a wheelchair pushed by her father, holding what seemed to be a clarinet case. The two of them chatted among themselves cheerfully, discussing some particularly difficult piece of homework.

Well, they were, it seemed, true to their beliefs.

So maybe they wouldn't reject him for what he was. But there was still the fear that Heidel might reject him because he was simply not that good, and Erik was not entirely ready for that notion. At least being rejected for being strange, disfigured, and wild was something he had learned to deal with; rejection, because he was simply not good enough was an entirely new feeling he would have to get accustomed to and he was, to put it quite plainly -

I don't think I've ever been this nervous in my life.

He took a deep breath in. His hands were in his pockets, so nobody could tell how much they were shaking. His heart, although close to exploding, was still safely in his chest. His mind, although clouded with fear, could still be persuaded to think. Those three were the only things he had, the only things he could count on, and it would be enough.

Leaving is not an option.

But I have no clue whatsoever what I'm going to say.

What was that sentence - good afternoon Maestro, I'd like to give you this stack of papers that contains my whole heart, I do hope it's to your liking -

He looked down at his feet. The building was making his head spin.

Maybe I can just take a step - he put one foot in front of him - and then the next one, next step, and then just repeat that a few more times until I reach a door.

He reached the goddamn door.

I know how to open a door. I'll just open it.

He pushed the door open and found himself in the middle of a round, spacious lobby.

"Sir?" a young woman with thick-rimmed glasses at the reception desk called after him as he stood and looked around.

Well, it would be impolite if I just left without saying anything.

He walked up to her desk.

"Can I help you, sir?" she asked politely, eyeing him with very obvious unease.

"I'm looking for Fritz Heidel", he somehow pulled out of himself.

"Is Mr. Heidel expecting you, sir?" the woman, although unsure what to make of him, was far too professional to let Heidel's potential associate feel unwelcome; she looked down quickly, rummaging through her book and heap of notes.

"Yes", he said quietly. "We have, a meeting."

"May I ask your name, sir?" she looked up at him expectantly.

Erik waited for one, two, or three heartbeats before he slowly said for the first time in his life,

"I'm Erik Giry."

He wondered absentmindedly how the woman would react if he told her, you're the first person in the entire world who has heard me use my name.

The woman looked somewhat eager to get him out of her hair and, probably, go home.

"Certainly, sir, he's expecting you. Please sign your name here. Mr. Heidel is on the third floor, right hallway, second door."

Erik wrote his name quickly - other names he saw in the book above his own had elaborate signatures, and he wondered for a moment if he was doing something wrong, but the woman simply took the book back and nodded. "Thank you, sir. Have a nice day."

He nodded, "You too", and walked slowly up the stairs.

And that was that. There was no going back now.

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The response reached Nikola in a matter of only a few days after he sent his letter - he was just packing up his things and making a shopping list for supplies he would have to buy before he left when his landlady called him from below to get his mail.

"Certainly, ma'am", he put out his cigarette into a neat little tray by the open window - Nikola didn't like leaving the smell of tobacco in other people's rooms - and went downstairs to pick up his mail. He nodded politely to the landlady's teenage daughter, who blushed slightly as always when she saw him and excused himself to go read his mail in peace.

Alina and Amelija's letters were exactly as he expected them - a lot of heartfelt goodbyes and invitations to visit as soon as he comes back, and sincere pleas that he take good care of himself and not let any bears maul him while he's in the wild. Nikola read them patiently, but what interested him was the light little envelope with his name written on it in unfamiliar, slightly messy handwriting. While he (unlike the rest of his family) put absolute trust in Alina and Amelija's judgments of character, he was still curious to find out at least something about the mysterious man that had seemingly snatched away the problematic heiress out of her family's paws.

To Mr. Nikola Boričević,

Thank you for your letter. I'm not at all inconvenienced by Amelija staying longer, and I'm not normally in the business of giving Alina permission to do things she wants to do, so you need not worry about it. Amelija is safe here. Take care while you're in Canada.

Erik Giry

"Hmm", Nikola hummed to himself as he rolled another cigarette, "that explains a lot, and yet raises so many more questions. Good luck ever digging that fellow's secrets out, Amelija."

Chapter 31: Maestro

Erik walked up the stairs and wandered through the hallways of the Conservatory, too nervous to note its wide, airy spaces or the portraits of musicians that hung on its walls. He had picked a time when students would be let home for the day, but rehearsals for concerts wouldn't yet be starting; nobody was in the third-floor hallway aside from him and so he at least had some blessed peace to silently panic.

Realizing someone might arrive at some point and catch him staring at a closed door like a madman, he straightened his spine, took his stack of sheet music in one hand, and knocked very politely, barely audibly, with the other.

He began to panic again when he received no reply, but then realized it was probably too quiet for anyone to hear, and tried to knock again with a little more confidence.

"Come in", Fritz Heidel replied absentmindedly, not looking up from his work. He was fuming over the giant stack of paper on his desk, trying to make sense of the Conservatory's official financial documentation. It wasn't going very well. Heidel was a fantastic conductor, professor, and theoretician, and his documents were always perfectly organized and completely transparent - yet the one thing he hated doing was wasting his precious time organizing other people's messes. Unfortunately, as much as he hated it he was also very good at it, which was how he ended up in his current situation.

"Good afternoon", said the quiet voice as the thin masked man dressed in black stepped slowly into his office and stood, straight but somewhat stiff, in the open doorway. "I'm sorry", the man continued, probably noting Heidel's tired, annoyed face. "Am I interrupting you? I thought we said five o'clock."

Heidel cast a tiny glance to the clock on his wall, noting it was indeed three minutes to five, then gathered himself and quickly cleared his workspace, putting the papers neatly in the drawer of his giant, heavy mahogany desk.
"Yes, you are and thank god for it. I'm glad you came today, Mr. Giry", he stood up and offered the man his hand.
"Likewise", Erik closed the door quickly. He offered his own, gloved hand, which was mercifully not shaking anymore.
"Please", Heidel waved at the chair across from his, "sit down."
Erik sat down in one quick motion, his spine still straight and stiff, offset by the incredible gentleness with which he put the folder with his score on the desk.
Heidel took off his reading glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose.
"Right. Pardon me, Mr. Giry, I'm rather overworked these days. You'll have to remind me what we agreed on when we met-"
Erik nodded, taking the score out of its folder. On the outside, he looked cold and calculated, when in reality these careful and precise movements were the only things stopping his entire nervous system from screaming. "I showed you this part, and this one, and I made some changes as you suggested across the second and third movement. It works well together, as you've said. I've also transcribed some of this into a piano score, so you can play it for yourself if you wish to hear it - or I could, I mean, if you'd prefer", he added quickly, wondering if that was a rude thing to say.
"Oh. Clever", Heidel remarked. "Some of these harmonies are… unusual, I'd have to focus quite a lot to go through the full score. This simplifies things, and saves my time." God bless you, young man. Time is not something I currently have at my disposal. "May I have a moment to take a look at this?"
"Certainly", Erik shrugged, silently relieved. He wasn't in a hurry and given some time he might be able to gather himself and say a sentence or two he hadn't learned by heart in advance.

"Mmmmm." Heidel looked through the papers, noting the corrections Erik made - they were not quite literal to what he remembered saying to him, but Erik had a very good idea of what Fritz liked to see, judging by the changes.
"Very well, Mr. Giry. I can see this happening. There are always musicians in need of a project in this place", he raised his head to look the young man in the eye. "And what would you like us to do with it, now?"

Erik blinked, his stiff demeanor slipping away for a second. "Excuse me?"
"Well, I'm guessing you'd like us to provide you with a venue and some performers, as well as discuss your salary if this turns out to be a commercial success. Is that so?" Heidel looked at him strictly, unsure what the problem was.
"I, uh- a-a-are you saying you accept?" Erik stuttered. You're letting me? You're just going to let me?
"Are you surprised, sir? I thought that was obvious from the start." Heidel straightened a bit. "Those were only minor revisions I asked for, were they not? We'll discuss some other details as well, but even so, I've been fairly certain from the start we'd go along with this."
"Uh", Erik's heart was now dangerously close to breaking out of his ribcage. "Pardon me, maestro, I need a second." he leaned his forehead on his hand for a second, momentarily forgetting what Heidel might think of that display of shock before he composed himself again.
Heidel, having seen this reaction from many young, then-obscure musicians during his lifetime, suddenly realized what was going on and smiled slightly. "If you'd like to stretch your legs along the hallway a bit, I'll wait."
"No need", Erik straightened, knowing full well that if he left Heidel's office at this moment he would probably not stop walking until he reached the West Coast. "Well. Then. The uh, details."

"Alright. What did you have in mind?" Heidel repeated. "Do you have any performers or venues in mind so far? Did you perhaps want to conduct it, or play the solo violin?"
"Oh", Erik's voice broke in a single rasp, and he coughed in a desperate attempt to bring it back. "Absolutely not. Maestro. I'm not meant for the stage. I can help behind the curtain, I can pick the performers and the venue - that is, I would like to, but I don't have to - I can help with rehearsals, but I would not like to be seen on the stage, no. There are plenty of talented soloists we can find in this city."
"Well, if you're so sure", Heidel shrugged. It wasn't his concern, for all he cared. "And who do you want to have as your conductor? We could find someone new, maybe a graduate..."
Heidel trailed off as he looked back at Erik. What followed was the longest, most embarrassing silence in the entire world as Erik looked at Heidel, his eyes frozen in a guilty-

"Ah", Heidel rubbed his eyes. "Well, I'm honored, but I'm afraid I'm very busy these days. I'll see what I can do, but I can't promise anything."
Erik said nothing once again, merely blinked and nodded.
"Right. Well." Heidel coughed slightly, trying to temper down Erik's constant torrent of silent but very overwhelming emotions. "This should be very interesting. It's new, it's very emotional, very complex - the young people are going to love it, that's for sure. I have one more suggestion, though, the only major one." he waved the sheets containing the first movement at Erik. "This one. I'd change that one if I were you. Listen- you're very promising, but you're young and this is your debut work. I'd tweak it to be a little more convenient if I were you because it would open many more doors for you if you could adjust it a little bit to the current musical elite. It's not a condition - I don't care what you do - just advice."
Having said that, Heidel leaned back and watched Erik intently, with a look that was probably still roaming his former students' nightmares.
"Maestro", Erik said quietly and carefully. This was something he knew would happen, and had prepared his entire answer in advance, and rehearsed it to perfection. After he was caught off-guard and nearly mute the last time, he realized some things today would be too important not to express clearly. Heidel was rather pleased with this man - though it was obvious Erik's temper was more or less a raw exposed nerve, the same was true for many other musicians. The amount of effort that went into the polite, temperate, thoughtful facade was all the more impressive for it.
"Maestro, I have read the books you sent to me, and I've read some more on my own. I have attended every possible rehearsal, concert, and open lecture I could manage, whenever I was free from work, in the past year and a half, in every possible venue I could find, not just the Carnegie Hall or the Philharmonic." he took in a deep breath. "I am, by now, aware of what you want from me, and I'm willing to compromise. I'll make this symphony together with the people who perform it. I have been changed by New York and its music in the past year and a half, and it's only right that this symphony should be changed to reflect that. But."
He tapped his gloved fingers on the desk thoughtfully, then continued.
"But, this first movement, as embarrassing as it is to me now, should remain the same. It is aggressive, dissonant, and juvenile - but it is an honest and accurate depiction of my state of mind at that time - and I'd like it to remain there if only to show how the following movements will differ from it. I'm

aware I could rewrite it into something more palatable. You're right to suggest that. However, I've always thought that this symphony's redeeming quality was that it was honest when I could not be, and I'd like it to remain honest, even if that might make it uglier. That is what I think since you have directly asked me, for which I am grateful."

Heidel took a minute to think, resting his chin between his thumb and forefinger as his brow furrowed.

"Understandable", he finally said, "And, frankly, it's a good idea. As you've already noticed, I appreciate it when composers don't shy away from experimenting with less, ah, conventional musical expression, even when it doesn't pander to the audience's tastes. Unfortunately, that does mean most people won't understand it. You won't get public fame and recognition from this, probably." he looked at Erik, not wanting to immediately say, but those who truly hear the music will hear this, oh they will. They are sure to remember you. He was not one to boost musicians' egos too much too soon.
"That's alright", Erik said. "I intend to write more music and not all of it like this."
"You'll also need musicians willing to perform it - it's quite difficult." and frankly, we don't have that much money and I don't intend to risk it with pulling favors in the old Academy, so you'll have to do with students. Or whoever else you can think of.
"Yes", Erik nodded. "This symphony only needs a very small orchestra - thirty or so people should be enough. It does need two solo performers, but you needn't worry about that - I'll find them myself. I don't need famous names, I need people who are willing to work hard and who will understand what this -" he waved at the papers, this distilled representation of who I am, but let's not tell him that, "this all means. I'll find people who will approach this with heart, and I don't care who they are."
"Very well. If you do not - I could gather an orchestra of my students, and I'll pick the best ones I can find", Heidel smiled. "They're too scared of me to refuse if I tell them it's for a grade - you'll have your orchestra within a week, and I'll have one less Conservatory project I'd otherwise have to come up with myself." he studied the young man, wondering how he would react to that - having Heidel simply assign the musicians would make Erik's job easier.

Erik shook his head. "Thank you, but no."
"No?" Heidel raised one impressively strict eyebrow.
"It's your choice, Maestro, whether and how you will grade your students, but I don't wish this to be mandatory for anyone. I'd prefer if everybody who is there truly wants to be there - even if that means it will take more time to gather a whole orchestra. Otherwise, I don't see this ending well at all." Erik was starting to feel like he was watching his body from a distance - some other man was currently possessing it, talking to Heidel calmly and politely, and Erik would probably reunite with his body later and start screaming. But for now, this arrangement was just fine.
"Alright", Heidel straightened with a smile and some newfound respect, "We can make a compromise. They will need some incentive - they have enough work as it is, nobody sane would bother to take on a project like this for nothing on top of everything else." Aside from me, Heidel thought, but if I was sane I wouldn't be here. "The Conservatory doesn't have enough money to pay for a whole orchestra because of my whim, so I will give my students extra credit and a written recommendation in exchange for participating. They will gain something if they join, but lose nothing if they don't. Do you agree?"
"Yes", Erik nodded. "I… I think that's realistic." he paused for a few seconds, then continued tentatively, "I saw a young woman outside - clarinetist, black hair, fifteen or sixteen. She was in a wheelchair. Is she by any chance your student?"
"Beatrice?" Heidel raised his eyebrows. Erik noted the way he pronounced her name- in Italian, not English. "Y-yes, Beatrice Lucchesi is my friend's daughter. She's in my solfeggio class. Very talented girl. Why do you ask?"
"I'd like you to ask her first if that's alright."
"Hmm", Heidel thought about it. "Of course, Beatrice would be a good choice. She's a good clarinetist, although with her talent for harmonics she would have made an even better composer. But she likes attention and wants to be on the stage, even despite - well, she needs some assistance, but we'll manage. Very well. Why, if I may ask, do you want her specifically?"
"Well, I saw her outside talking to her father about homework", Erik fumbled. "I've never heard someone get so excited about their solfeggio homework. Most people hate that subject." But I don't, he finished in his head.
Heidel let out a loud, surprised laugh. "Ha! Excellent. I have no problem

asking her and her father. If her health allows it - of course. Not many projects pick her first, which is a terrible shame - she's smarter than most of her classmates combined."
"Good. Thank you."
"No problem", Heidel smiled with a hint of smugness. "You have a good intuition, Mr. Giry. If you have any other specific wishes, you can tell me - if it's doable, we'll try it. For now, I'll put out a notice, and I'll get back to you in a week or two with whoever I've managed to gather."
"Thank you, maestro", Erik nodded politely and stood up in one swift motion. "For your time and effort. I won't be keeping you any longer."
"No problem. I'm looking forward to this project. We might have something truly special here", Heidel leaned back in his chair, smiling slightly at Erik as he interlaced his fingers in front of him. "You know, this orchestra - this gaggle of moody adolescents, to be precise - might start calling you maestro soon, as well. They're all little perfectionists; if you ever decide to meet them personally they'll be pulling your sleeve in a matter of minutes, asking how long exactly you want that coda to be on page ten, or how quiet your pianissimo usually is."
Erik paused at the door, and for a second the stiff, polite facade slipped away to reveal a sliver of actual personality. "Sounds horrifying. Just tell them I'm dead."

Chapter 32: Nothing Really Happens In This One

It was still daytime when Erik burst through the front door looking entirely disheveled and unhinged. Alina was alone, intentionally so - she had very little doubt in the positive outcome of Erik's meeting, but still thought it better if he had some space when he came back, just in case. And so while he was gone she'd sent everyone away and, unable to calm down while waiting for him, she found herself doing meaningless chores she normally hated doing just to find something to occupy her hands. It was getting so critical that she had taken her giant winter coat out and was now pondering if there was a way to mend the pockets and the lining when he stormed in like a hurricane and she automatically dropped everything she was doing.

"Alina!" he called and she instantly got up, opening her mouth to ask what happened, when he simply ran up to her, pulled her in a very tight embrace that lifted her off her feet and spun her around like a whirlwind, laughing a loud, clear, and charmingly contagious laugh that she had never heard from him before. Alina threw her hands around his neck to hold on for dear life and laughed in surprise as well - and when he finally put her down, his eyes could have been two brightest stars in the sky.

"He agreed!" Erik grabbed her shoulders, his thin mouth still curled in the most brilliant smile Alina had ever seen on a human being. "They're going to do it! They're going to play it!"

"Oh my god", Alina squealed and threw herself into his arms again. "It's happening!"

"You'll finally be able to hear it!" Erik exclaimed in pure exhilaration as he stumbled a little to keep his balance when she collided with him.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" Alina had already given up on any pretense of maturity. "You're getting your first concert! Oh my god! I'm so happy for you! You deserve this so much!"

"We should celebrate!" Erik ran his fingers through his hair, trying to think. "I-I don't know how, though, give me a moment."

"Don't you perhaps want to rest?" Alina asked. She eyed him with slight wariness. "How long has it been since you properly slept? It has to be at least since you started making the piano score-"

"I know exactly how many hours it's been, and I'm not telling you", he replied cheerfully. "I am not closing my eyes for a second until I decide I've had enough of being awake."

"Understandable", Alina smiled, hoping he wouldn't collapse somewhere she couldn't get him back from. "Well, in that case, do you want to take a walk with me while we think about something to do? I want to hear all of the details, everything they said."

"Alright, darling", Erik offered his hand. "Please, grace me the pleasure and honor of your company."

"Yes, sir, absolutely", she smiled and curtsied, taking his hand. "It's just in time for sunset, too."

"And what did you say?" Alina's eyes widened.

"Well, I asked him to take only the students that volunteered, instead of making it mandatory. I thought if it's something they have to do, and it's quite hard as well, they'll hate it by the end of the first week."

"You're right", Alina laughed. "That's just how students are. Good thinking."

"Well, I vaguely remembered you saying something like that awhile ago", he nodded at her. "About one of your projects."

"I did? I don't remember."

"Of course, you don't. If you remembered everything you talked about, you wouldn't have enough memory left for anything else- ow." he rubbed his shoulder where Alina hit him.

"Alright, what else happened?" She asked.

Erik laid out the whole conversation in a surprising amount of detail - it seemed that he had already spent his entire way back replaying it in his head, analyzing everything that was said; Alina kept silent while struggling to make sense of this uncharacteristically detailed rambling.

"Alright", she laughed. "I think I could recreate that entire scene in my head just from what you've told me now."

"I think I've made a good impression", Erik looked into the distance. "I think I have. I told him everything I wanted - but I didn't offend him. At least I think so."

"No, no, it was perfect", Alina bumped him again, lightly this time. "It was. I think he likes you. And that girl, the clarinetist - it's nice that you're giving her a chance."

"As I said, she was just so excited when she talked - and if she's really good, she deserves to be on the stage. If she can get excited about something as tedious as solfeggio, she won't have any problems with this", he shook his head. "Well, that's all. That's all that happened. Oh, I signed my name in that book they had at the reception- I mean, that's not important, but I realized I don't have a particular signature."

"Oh, that's fine, you don't have to. You'll develop it naturally over the years. But, I suppose you can just come up with something you like and practice it until it comes naturally to you, some people do that as well. "

"What do you think I should do?" he asked thoughtfully.

"I don't think much about signatures, to be honest", Alina laughed. "Now, where are you taking me? I was sure we'd go somewhere with fewer people."

"We're getting you something to eat first", Erik smiled at her from the side. "Isn't this normally the time you eat dinner?"

"It is, but it can wait-"

"How do you feel about pretzels from that stand you liked?" Erik bowed his head, suddenly looking slightly embarrassed. "I can get you anything you want, though. I normally prefer not having to enter shops - but it's your choice."

"What is this sudden compulsion to feed me?" Alina asked in amusement. "Am I wasting away?"

"I would have wasted away if it weren't for you. I don't remember eating at all in the past week, but I'm fairly certain I did, otherwise I would have died before I climbed the steps to Heidel's office. I'm suspecting you planted food in front of me when I wasn't looking, so I'd like to return the favor. Please let me buy you something you'd like", he smiled, the excitement in his voice replaced by quiet gentleness.

"Well, if you insist", Alina put her finger on her mouth, pretending to think. "It better be the biggest, saltiest pretzel you can find."

"Alright", Alina said, holding what was indeed the biggest and saltiest pretzel she could imagine, as well as a little basket of berries, and lovely, dainty-wrapped chocolate with little almonds in it. "Where now?"

"Well, now we can go somewhere less crowded."

The spot Erik had picked was indeed not crowded at all - there was nobody there, as it was a cave entrance on the edge of a cliff, and nobody bothered with that part of the shore anyway - it was rocky and hard to walk on, as opposed to the sandy beaches on the rest of the island. But the view of the sunset was indeed spectacular, and there was enough space to sit, and that was enough for the two of them.

Alina sat down eating her pretzel absentmindedly, looking into the sunset, only to be immediately pulled into Erik's arms.

"I'll get crumbs all over your nice shirt", Alina remarked.

"I've sacrificed more for your attention", he whispered into her hair.

Chapter 33:Door

Erik stormed out of his room, trying to cover his face with his hands and putting his shirt back on as quickly as possible at the same time.

"I can't do this", he said sharply, turning away from Alina who stepped out of the room slowly behind him.
"Alright", she replied quietly, covering her shoulders in her blanket and trying her best not to look hurt. "You don't have to do anything."
That was not what he wanted to hear, but what was it that he wanted to hear? What would have soothed the burning shame he felt all over his body? For once, he felt that if he reached out to her it would have only made it worse; he wanted to curl up within himself and disappear forever.
"I'm sorry", she said very quietly. "What did I do?"
"Nothing", he replied, completely surprised. "It's not your fault."
"Ah." she managed.
"This is just wrong. It feels wrong. I can't do it", he said, still turned away from her, waving his hands in frustration. "I'm sorry."
"You don't have to be sorry", she whispered. "You have the right not to want me."
That was shocking enough to shake him out of his spiraling, curling thoughts and force him to turn to her. "What?"
Alina shrugged, not eager to elaborate.
"Is that what you think this is about?" he asked. "Me not wanting… you?"
Alina shrugged again. She'd prefer it if he didn't repeat it so much.
"It's not", he said, wide-eyed. "It has nothing to do with that."
"Ah", she repeated, tightening the blanket around her.
"Listen", he said, shame coming back full force with some frustration on the side. "It has to do with… other things." he felt his cheeks burning, heat spreading to his ears.
Alina looked at him in silence for a few seconds, pondering whether to ask or not. "What things?"

"I, I can't, I can't talk about it!" he nearly hissed, running his hands through his hair.
She looked at him for another second, before averting her eyes when she realized this was not the best time to stare at him.
"I'm sorry!" he continued, walking past her to go back to his room. "I'm sorry you have to… I'm sorry I disappointed you!" he closed the door and locked it, standing in the middle of the room and debating whether he should simply dig a hole in the ground and throw himself in it.
A few moments later, he heard light shuffling outside as Alina moved to sit in front of the room, leaning her back on the door. She rapped lightly on the door with her fingers but otherwise said nothing. She did have her key to the room - she could have attempted to enter if she wanted to, but she just sat there.
After a few minutes, he walked to the door and slid down, sitting on the other side. He could feel she was close, even though she was on the other side of this thick wooden plank. He could see her shadow through the gap above the floor.
"I'm sorry", he repeated. "I didn't think it would be like this."
There was no noise on the other side.
"I'm afraid being with me is just disappointment all the way through", he continued. "I wish I could- give you all you deserve, all that I have to make you happy." he took a deep breath. "Unfortunately, all that I have is not much. Not nearly enough."
"But it's all I want", he heard a faint whisper through the door.
"But all it does is make you miserable", he raised his voice slightly. "Do you think I didn't want to - don't want to - this - one thing I - why can't anything go right for once?"
"Maybe it's not about going right or wrong", came another whisper.
"There is not a single thing I can do like a - a - an actual man!" he was nearly yelling now. "I was stupid to want this, stupid to assume I would somehow - " he stopped himself and started breathing deeply, unable to finish the sentence.
"Am I stupid to want this, too, then?" came another whisper.
"You're wrong", he managed. "It's wrong. You're … mistaken."
"Mistaken?"
"About me", he whispered. "About… all this. I'm not a man who will- hold you and give you what you deserve, and what you want -"

"What are you then?"
"I am rot", he spat out finally. It even felt sort of cathartic, saying it out loud for the first time. "I'll poison you and the more you let me touch you, the worse it will get."
Alina blinked in stunned silence. How was she supposed to reply to that?
"You're… afraid of hurting me?" she finally managed after a minute.
Erik sighed. It was, at the same time, spot-on and completely beside the point.
"Do you not think I would tell you if you were hurting me?" she asked. "Do you not think I would protest if this was not what I wanted?"
She could swear she heard a nearly-soundless sob from the other side. Yes, he knew that she would - but if she did, it would end him. Especially since…
"Hurting is all I can do", he said.
"That has not been true so far", she said gently. "Why is now any different?"
"I was pretending."
"Oh? It was all pretense? You don't love me?"
"I do."
"What, then?"
"I was pretending to be a normal man. To myself. It made… everything easier."
"Oh. And now you're no longer pretending?" Alina's mind raced. That, as insane as it sounded, did explain some of this.
"I can't." he took another breath. "You know everything. You've… seen everything. And I can't really… hide anymore. Even if you're delusional, if I-" he swallowed again, "if you just look at me now- it's obvious. I'm not someone else."
"Ah." she paused. "No masks. Literally and figuratively."
"So to speak."
"Do you think it's some other man I want?"
"You say you don't", he said slowly. "But it doesn't change how… how it feels when you look at"
"How does it feel?"
"Shame. Burning. So scorching, it turns… touch into... hot iron."
"I'm sorry", she whispered. "I didn't know."
"It's not your fault."

"I want to help", floated through the door to him, like a soft little cloud among spikes and thorns.
"I don't know how."
"What do you want, then?" she asked.
"I don't know. I want to disappear."
"That would ruin me", she said gently. "I'd rather you didn't disappear, whichever shape or form you are. However close I can get."
He waited for a moment before asking, "Would that be enough?"
"Yes."
"Even if it doesn't get better?"
"Even so. I'll still love you", she added tenderly through the door.
She heard nothing for the longest time yet. Erik sat in the same position on the floor for God knows how long, gathering his courage.
He raised his hand above his head and unlocked the door.
Alina waited some more.
"If you're still leaning on the door, you might want to move", he added.
Alina shuffled to the right until her back was against the wall, right next to the door.
The door opened and Erik slowly came out, illuminated in the very dim light of the candle that burned on the kitchen table - just barely bright enough to discern that he was still disheveled and without his mask. He closed the door behind him and very slowly sat next to her on the floor, looking ahead of him.
After a few moments of silence, Alina took his hand and leaned her head on his shoulder.
"I love you too", he said. After a few moments, he added, "I'll try."

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burning shame all over his skin subsided with time to just a dull pain in his chest as they sat together on the floor, lost in thought. Erik's head leaned on Alina's over time without him noticing it until she shifted slightly and her hair tickled against his exposed cheek. He turned a little to plant a small kiss on top of her head. She chuckled slightly.
"I don't know how long we've been sitting here, but I'm quite sure my legs are numb by now", she said.

"Sorry."
"Apologize one more time today, I swear to God-"
"Fine, fine", he said. "Do you want to move?"
"Oh, yes. But I don't think I can. You might have to carry me", she said, looking at him innocently. Erik turned to her, sighing, as the corner of his mouth twitched into a slight smile. He put her arm over his shoulders and hauled her to her feet with him, putting the other arm under her knees and lifting her in his arms.
"Happy?" he asked. She leaned her face on his shoulder, smiling. It was still very unnerving to have her so close to his exposed head, but sort of easier when she wasn't looking directly at him.
"Mhm", she grinned.
"Where am I carrying you?"
"Well, it would be wise if we both went back to bed", she said slowly. "Technically, it's still very much nighttime."
"Fine", he sighed, walking back to his room. He lowered her on the bed gently, then sat on its edge.
"I don't think I'll be able to sleep", he admitted. I'd like to lie close to you again if you still want-
"You can keep me company", Alina smiled with her eyes half-closed and her dark hair spilled all over the pillows. "Or, not. Whatever you prefer. I'll be around", she laughed.
That struck a chord. Erik kept looking silently ahead.
"It's really fine if you want some time for yourself", Alina said. In the dim light, he noticed how her lips always had a particular upward curve to them, as if she was always smiling, and how the wisps of her hair always seemed to find a way to rest on her cheeks.
He turned to face her. "Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?"
She smiled slightly.
"Well, you are."
"Are you afraid I'll disappear if you leave this room?" She asked gently.
"Huh." He stood up. "I suppose I'll have to find out."
He left the room, straightening his shirt - but decided to keep his mask off, for reasons he couldn't explain.

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Alina?" Erik entered the room only fifteen minutes later, with a very shy look in his eyes. "Are you still awake?"
"I am." But already quite sleepy, as she turned and looked at him through dark eyelashes.
"Can I-"
Alina shifted to make room for him without a word, and he carefully lay down next to her. He lay his head down on his arm, turning to her, with his other hand tracing very lightly down her cheek.
"I don't tell you often enough how beautiful you are", he remarked. "You're entirely radiant- you're like the sun, and sometimes it's hard to even look at you. Every time you're near me, every single thing around you is illuminated. Every color becomes brighter. Everything becomes right as it should be - sometimes even me."
Alina's dark eyes glinted in the dim light looking more awake now, but she made no sound.
"Maybe", he said, fingers tracing lightly down her neck. Alina closed her eyes and sighed quietly, and Erik thought his heart might damn near burst out of his chest. He tried to steady himself, hoping she wouldn't notice his hand shaking. "Maybe I should allow it - the possibility of it happening - without any games or pretense. Maybe it was me in here with you all along."
Alina said nothing, but her chest moved a little quicker as his fingers moved down to her collarbone.
"Is this bad, what I'm doing?" he asked, as his hand moved slowly a little lower. "Am I capable of destroying you, in any way?"
Alina let out a barely audible little moan as Erik's fingers traced gently across her breast, and her back reflexively arched slightly to get closer to him.
"Oh God", he whispered. "Oh, oh God, you are so beautiful."
Alina grabbed the front of his shirt and slowly pulled him closer until he was on top of her. Erik moved carefully, propping himself up on his elbows, as Alina wrapped her legs around his and unbuttoned the top two buttons on his shirt. Her cheeks were very obviously flushed, her eyes half-closed as she ran her fingers down his scarred chest.
Erik finally lost himself.
Kneeling above her, he undid the laces of her nightdress in a frenzy, and she followed with the same fervor; laughing slightly when her sleeve got stuck

as she frantically pulled it off. She lay there, underneath him, happy and vulnerable as the night air tickled her skin, tracing the scars on his narrow, mangled chest with her fingers. Erik repeated the same process in the same fevered rush with his clothes as he suddenly decided there wasn't a single inch of his body that wasn't screaming for direct contact with her skin. Feeling a sudden sense of unease, he lay back down and hugged her to him tightly, burying his face in her neck and pulling the bed covers over them both. He paused like that for a moment, soaking in the warmth.
"We're safe", he said without thinking. "And I love you."
"We are. I love you too", she whispered.
"I need to know you want this."
"I do."
For the first time in his life, Erik drowned in the feeling of warmth all around him; he felt it in his chest, his throat, his lungs, his hands - he could feel Alina's heartbeat synching up with his own and her body holding him so close that he couldn't tell anymore where his own body ended. All the sharp, painful spikes in his head retracted and drowned in the all-forgiving warmth with each movement he made, until he finally collapsed into her arms, both of them breathing in the same heavy unison.
He wanted to ask her if she was alright, but the words wouldn't leave his mouth. Everything around him disappeared except for her heartbeat in his ear and her fingers running through his hair.

Chapter 34:Life Is A Dream

While Alina and Erik were enjoying their moment of bliss far away from everyone, Amelija was, per her sister's request, out for the day to find her amusement.

She visited some shops, enjoying the fact that she could now buy some clothes without having to risk Alina commenting on everything she looked at. Amelija liked hats, shawls, and pretty shoes; her taste in fashion was quite refined and particular, and it brought her genuine joy to be able to experience different fashions and aesthetics now that she was on a completely new continent.
As the afternoon was slowly melting into a calm and warm evening, Amelija found herself strolling through the neighborhood aimlessly, wondering what else she might do. She decided to drop by Yana's pastry shop to chat after her shift was over, maybe get some cakes in case there might be cause for celebration when she was interrupted by a particular tandem in front of the shop - Jack was walking around the shop chatting cheerfully with Piotr who was hanging from his back, his legs wrapped around Jack's torso and arms around Jack's neck. Piotr saw Amelija first and waved in her direction,
"Hi! Amelija!" he smiled. "What are you doing? How are you?"
"Good afternoon, Miss Amelija", Jack said cheerfully as Piotr waved from his shoulder.
"Good afternoon", Amelija smiled. "I'm fine, I'm just wandering around. How are you, Piotr?"
"Good. I'm waiting for Erik."
"Really?" Jack turned his head to him, pretending to be offended. "And here I was, thinking we were having a good time. What do I need to do to make you like me more than him?"
"Nothing", Piotr said in a sing-song voice. "You can't."
"How ungrateful of you."

"Sorry", Piotr sang. "Put me down so you can talk to her."
"Um, sure", Jack bent down, surprised at Piotr's insightfulness, and Piotr hopped off.

"I'll be at the back entrance. I'll wait for mom. Give me my stuff", he held out his hand with confidence, and Jack laughed.

"Yes, sir", he said, pulling a little picture book and a wooden horse out of his pockets. "Your mom should be done about now, so go and ask them if you can stay inside and wait. Don't you go into the street, alright?"
"I'm not stupid", Piotr shook his head and hopped off around the building.
"Don't worry about it", Amelija smiled as Jack turned back to her. "It makes sense that he would like Erik more, he's a lot closer to his level of maturity."
"Ouch", Jack smiled, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "Are you, perchance, also grumpy for being cast out of the house for the day?"
"I would have cast myself out anyway", Amelija rolled her eyes. "There hasn't been a single moment of peace there in the past week. I never realized how much I enjoy the silence before."
"Those little pianos are louder than they look, aren't they?"
"It's not a-" Amelija started, then paused and laughed. "Oh my god. Am I being brainwashed?"
"I'm afraid so", Jack grinned at her. "I think the only antidote to it would be to enjoy some fresh air and a change of company. Would you, by any chance, be interested in joining me for dinner with some friends? I promise I'll get you back home in time."
"Hmm", Amelija pretended to think. "Well, yes, I would. Who are your friends?"
"Oh, just my old buddies from work", Jack started walking with Amelija following, a little slower than he normally would. "We sometimes gather at this restaurant in honor of the good old times - we were all in the same newspaper once, but we had to split. If you're alright with it, I'd just like to drop by my house for a moment first - I need to get my jacket, and I have something for you as well. No, it's a surprise, I just thought you might like it."

"Ladies and gentlemen", Jack announced as he entered the cozy little Manhattan pub and approached the longest table with a group of people

who looked like they'd already started having fun. "Please, I'd like your attention. This wonderful lady is Miss Amelija Boričević, and she's come from Austria-Hungary to enjoy some American culture. Amelija, meet the creme de la creme of New York."
"Not sure you'll get many cultures with Jack, miss", said the man to Amelija's left as he raised his beer glass at her. "You might get the exact opposite." he seemed a little older than the rest of them, with a mischievous look in his brown eyes and very impressive sideburns.
"That would be Benny", Jack purred as he took a chair from another table and set it down for Amelija to sit. She shook Ben's hand and politely sat down, looking around. The place was small and cozy, with a wooden interior inspired by Irish pubs; on the blackboard, she saw written in chalk the currently available beers and snacks. "You can ignore him, as we all do. His job description was more or less "buzzkill"."
"Jack means to tell you", Benny winked at her, "that I was their editor. And he's right. As his boss, it was largely my job to bring him down from his magnificent, grand, delusional plans for taking over the world."
"Over there are Charlie, Peggy, Lily, Dave, Clint, Edward, and Joe", Jack pointed at each with his finger, and all of them raised their glasses cheerfully at Amelija.
"Let the poor girl breathe, Franklin", said the woman Amelija remembered as Peggy. "You're overwhelming her. We'll have enough time to introduce ourselves without your help."
"Oh, no, don't worry", Amelija smiled a brilliant smile, feeling an old spark deep in her come back to life. "I've remembered you all, and I can prove it. Let's start from the opposite side."
She got up and pointed her finger, chanting. "Joe. Edward. Clint. Dave. Lily. Peggy. Charlie." then she turned to her left, "And of course, Benny. The editor." Then she turned to Jack. "And the strange man that kidnapped me from the street and dragged me here - the name escapes me."
The crowd paused for a moment as she sat down with a satisfied smile, then burst out laughing and rushed to pour her a drink. "Oooooooh, Jack, have you finally found someone to tame your annoying ass?" Lily laughed.
"Miss, Amelija, I'm afraid this man who kidnapped you probably didn't count on you stealing his spotlight here - don't worry, we're all very thankful for it."
Amelija laughed as well, turning over to Jack to see how he was reacting to

having his spotlight stolen - he tilted his head in feigned heartbreak, tracing down an imaginary tear over his cheek, but as they stopped looking at him he cast a sideways glance at Amelija and gave her a tiny wink.
The day after Erik visited the Conservatory, Alina woke up to find him still sleeping soundly and dreamlessly next to her. He would normally wake before her, and wait until she opened her eyes to wish her good morning, but today he was tired from all the stress of the past week. His chest moved slowly with his breath, his arms were wrapped tightly around her and entangled with the light summer quilt they had covered themselves with. It was still quite early: the light outside was still soft and barely peeked through the curtains. Alina lay there thinking how she couldn't remember the last time she just relaxed in her bed in the morning, certain that the world would take care of itself. Today, it seemed that way to her, and it was a foreign feeling - and an even stranger feeling was that the world would take care of her, that the man sleeping by her side was holding her tightly like he never intended to let her go.
She enjoyed the silence for another half hour before she grew jittery and decided she would probably be better off starting her day.

"Erik", she turned to him, speaking softly. "I'm going to get up now. You can keep sleeping if you'd like. I'll be in the kitchen."

"Mmmm. No", he mumbled, pulling her closer. "Wait, I'll… I'll get up too."
Alina waited for a few more minutes while Erik's breathing slowed down again as he fell back asleep.
"Oh god. But I'm hungry", she moaned. Erik loosened his grip on her waist but made no effort to release her yet. Alina looked at his sleeping form, smiling to herself.
"Your hair is getting longer again", she remarked, ruffling it.
"Not long. Was long in Paris", he mumbled, apparently still half-asleep.
"Really? How long?"
"Down my back. Elbow maybe."
"You never told me that", Alina smiled. "That must have looked very impressive."
"Paganini had long hair. And a deal with the devil."
"Ah, I see. Understandable. What possessed you to cut it?" she asked with interest.

"Wanted to look normal." pause. "Wanted to forget."
"Well, that's a shame", she said, removing one messy strand from his cheek, "It's a waste of time for you to try and look normal when in reality you're just utterly magical all the way through."
Erik said nothing - he planted a small kiss on her head and entangled her once again in a mass of limbs and blanket, obviously drifting back to sleep before her eyes.
"You know what?" Alina let out a tiny laugh. "I just might stay in bed a little longer."
"Mhm."
After some more snuggling, Alina decided she was too hungry to go back to sleep. She carefully untangled herself from Erik's arms - he barely stirred, obviously still exhausted - got dressed, and went out.
"Good morning", Amelija raised her eyebrow at her. "Did you have a fun night?"
"Did you?" Alina replied politely, tilting her head.
They looked at each other for a second before bursting into laughter.
"But, really", Alina poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down across from Amelija, who was already on her second cup and halfway through her newspaper. "What were you up to last night?"
"Last night? I went to see Jack in the evening because he told me he had something for me. He gave me this", she waved at the book in her lap. "We walked around a bit, and had dinner with his friends, but it was hardly a night when I came back. You two were already asleep at ten when I arrived."
"Oh, we were tired."
"Finally", Amelija rolled her eyes in frustration. "I haven't been able to sleep properly for a week from your darling's frantic, obsessive working. Is he always like that?"
"Frantic and obsessive? Yes. This was slightly more extreme, maybe."
"And how did it go?" Amelija asked carefully.
"It went fantastically. Heidel agreed to assemble an orchestra and perform the symphony. Were you worried about him?" Alina smiled.
"Yes", Amelija shrugged. "They could have rejected him for whatever stupid reason, and he would have taken it personally."
"That's true. He would've found a way for it to be his fault, but luckily, it was all good. In any case, he might end up sleeping through the whole day.

He does that sometimes. What do you want to do?" Alina stretched a little. She could feel the stiffness in her ribs from sleeping too long without moving.
"First I'm going to check your favorite student's progress with his algebra homework, then we can do whatever you like", Amelija leaned her cheek on her hand. "Are you in trouble? Can you even think of something to do when all the problems are taken care of? Or will you be bored?"
"Ha, ha, very funny", Alina rolled her eyes. "Well, how is Walt doing? Do you want me to go with you?"
"Absolutely not", Amelija pointed her finger warningly at her. "He's insufferably sassy whenever you're around. He knows it makes you laugh, and he bends over backward to make you laugh, which is fine - but not when we have to do actual work. You can be friends with him later."
"Wait", Alina gasped. "He's not sassy with you?"
"Not until we're done with math. I don't have your patience for childish antics, and he knows it. He's well-behaved because it gets him more respect with me - well until I'm about to leave, then he feels the need to inform me about everything he's been suppressing for the past hour."
"You broke him!" Alina covered her mouth with her hand. "You broke my favorite student! But he was perfect, I loved him just the way he was!"
"Don't worry, he's still a little brat."
"I should hope so, or you're fired!"
"Quite bold of you to imply I was getting paid for this", Amelija sighed. "Are you sure you'll be alright, left to your own devices? You remember how to have fun on your own, right?"
"I...do", Alina tapped her fingers on her chin. "I have some ideas."

"God help you if you end up working. Or cleaning. I forbid you from doing anything useful or productive until I'm back."

Once she was finally alone, Alina realized for a god-knows-which time in her life that Amelija was right: she had grown so used to having company or working constantly, that she had no idea how to just relax by herself anymore. As she drank her coffee and ate her breakfast, she remembered she used to sit in parks and draw squirrels around her and cats that came to be petted when she was younger. She wrote a little note for Erik - get some rest, I'll be back soon, I love you - and got dressed, determined to find the

most comfortable bench under the biggest tree in the prettiest park, and stay there reading until she'd seen and petted every single cat in all of New York.
Erik slept through that entire day and only got up for a few hours in the evening, and when he got out of his room he was noticeably different. Others couldn't quite pinpoint it, but Alina knew exactly what it was: he was relaxed. He was even confident in a way. It was subtle - his movements were slower, his posture less stiff, and the way he talked to people was just a little less guarded and more open. It was almost as if he was occupying more space around him, but at the same more open to letting others into that space as well. It was interesting to see - it seemed that Erik, who was normally very sharp and temperamental, was in light of this new confidence becoming softer and calmer somehow. It continued over the next few days, and as subtle as it was, it was still noticeable. Jack and Yana noticed it as well, which they were quite happy to comment on - Yana, in particular, it seemed, could say almost anything to Erik without upsetting him and so when she remarked on how much happier he seemed for the past few days Erik didn't seem to assume his normal defensive stance at all, and simply agreed with her. Yes, he was happier and it was slightly terrifying; but he had nothing better to do than simply enjoy it for now.
Amelija said nothing about the change, feeling like it would be out of place - she merely congratulated him for his success and decided within herself that it might soon be the right time to have a certain very difficult conversation with him that she'd been putting off.
Over the next few days it occurred to Erik that, in his sincere wish to make Alina happy, he had failed to realize just how much longer Amelija would be staying – and how much longer it would be before he had a normal amount of time for himself and a normal amount of privacy he was used to. While the arrangement was working well for now - Amelija wasn't even home all that much, and they were all seemingly getting along well enough - he missed having the freedom he used to. It was irritating him slightly - not that she was around, but simply knowing that she had to be around for a while and he would have no way out of it unless he wanted to cause a scene for everyone.
It would have to work - he would have his little haven back by September to cocoon himself with Alina and focus on rehearsals once the concert season started; meanwhile, he would just try to survive and not think about too much. The upside of having friends was that, if he wanted somebody to

talk to or somewhere else to be, he would not have to be alone - although, he realized, he really would first like to be alone.
„I have to go talk to Jack", Erik said to Alina that afternoon. „I'll be back." He didn't have to go to Jack, exactly. Right now he just wanted to be alone, and he took his jacket, almost through the door when a voice stopped him.
„Excuse me. Can I come along? I have to return a book to him", Amelija said. He turned around only a tiny bit too quickly to hide his annoyance completely, but when he looked at her he was once again completely unreadable.
„I can do that for you", he said politely.
„No, that would be impolite", Alina hurried, looking at him angrily – what was he missing? Was it impolite and he was just unaware of it? Since when did Alina care about etiquette so much? „She should return it herself since he gave her his favorite book", she finished, her eyes drilling holes in his head.
„Alright", he said, looking at Alina. What the hell is happening to leave me alone we had a deal –
„I'll just take a second", Amelija said. She put on her jacket and hat with remarkable speed and grabbed her bag, stuffing a small book inside it. „We can go." He waited for her to catch up and walked out of the house, looking straight ahead with his face buried in the collar of his jacket and his hands in his pockets. He didn't mean to be rude or standoffish, but he had always been very annoyed in situations where he couldn't escape other people as soon as he'd like. Amelija tried to break the uncomfortable silence – Jack's house was a good twenty minutes away.
„We can speak in French", Amelija said, switching over. „If you're more comfortable that way."
„It's all the same", Erik shrugged, also continuing in French. „Speaking in any language is about the same kind of nuisance, to be honest. But thank you."
"Is my presence bothering you, Erik?" Amelija asked politely.
"No", he bowed his head at her. "I've already said so to your cousin, so don't worry."
„Are you certain? I don't want to drive you out of your own home", she said sweetly.
„You're very welcome to stay and keep Alina company", he replied in the sweetest tone he could muster. It was remarkably convincing and paired

with the angry spark in his eyes it made Amelija's hairs stand on their ends. It amazed her how much he could talk without actually admitting if he was bothered by her or not.
„I feel as though we started on the wrong foot", she tried more boldly. The only way to talk to this annoying idiot was to be so blunt he couldn't possibly avoid her. „When we met, I may have given you the impression – „
„Let me stop you right there", he said. „I don't know what Alina has told you about me, but I assure you her opinion is in the minority. You were perfectly right not to like me, and I don't have enough time to listen to you try to convince me that you did", he finished in a remarkably nonchalant voice, looking straight ahead of him.
Amelija blinked at him. She didn't like being out of her element, and this arse was making her insanely furious. Giving up on the game, she decided she'd give him a taste of his own medicine.
„You know, Erik, I don't dislike you, and I just wanted to thank you for welcoming me. I like being here, and I thought we were becoming friends. And Alina is not the only one who admires you", Amelija mentioned casually, „I spoke to Madame Giry a while ago, before I came here."
He continued walking silently. Amelija looked over to him, wanting to see what he was thinking about - but his face was completely unreadable as he stared straight ahead. She realized she had done something wrong, poked into something too hard - his relaxed behavior from a few days ago was gone. Not that he was doing anything out of the ordinary (aside from the complete silence), but she suddenly had a feeling she was watching a bad impression of someone trying very hard to inconspicuously navigate a possessed body from inside.
Creepy.
„Is Antoinette alright?" He replied quietly after a few more silent moments. His voice softened to something a lot gentler than she expected.
„Yes, for all I know. She's doing fine." She raised her eyebrows in surprise.
„Good."
His posture went back to normal as he let out a small sigh and seemingly relaxed a little. Amelija wasn't too keen to prod deeply into that wasp's nest, but she remembered her sister and opened her mouth once again.
„She told you about me, didn't she?" Erik said in a flat voice just as she was about to speak, still looking straight ahead. He was trying very hard to keep himself calm - this woman was smart enough not to open this conversation

if she was intending to drag him back and throw him in chains; if she believed that to be the right thing to do, she probably wouldn't risk staying alone with him in the first place. This was the time to be calm and talk. He blinked the dark spots away from his vision.
„Yes." Amelija looked away, feeling guilty for some reason.
„And what do you want from me, now?"
„I want to talk about it."
„And if I don't?"
„I can't make you, can I? But I think it's in everyone's best interest that I have a good story for my parents that will keep their noses out of this. Madame seems to think highly of you, and my sister adores you, but I'm not inclined to trust anyone's judgment blindly without forming my own opinion. So I'd like to talk and see what you have to say about all this, so I can go back home and lie to my parents with my conscience clear."
„What do you want to know?" The strange tone in his voice was replaced by something that sounded to Amelija like sadness.
„I've heard some versions of why you escaped France", she waved her hand. „From Madame, her daughter, and a certain very scared Opera singer."
„Ah." He stopped dead in his tracks and looked at her. „You've spoken to her."
„Yes. I've heard some interesting things." She raised her eyebrows at him again.
„That's it, then", he replied. „You have all the answers you need now." He nodded and turned to walk again. Amelija hurried after him, half-surprised and half-annoyed at this sudden rudeness.
„Excuse me? Those are not very favorable answers. Do you not have something to say for yourself?"
„Not at all", he raised his voice only slightly, clenching his fists but otherwise giving no sign of that strange creepiness returning. „If you combine whatever they told you, it will be accurate. More accurate than the answers I can provide you, as I was in the middle of a psychotic breakdown that entire time and don't remember that much. If you want my confession, you have it. However, if you wish to bring me back and turn me over, I'm afraid that won't happen."
„In the middle of a – „
„That we will not talk about", he eyed her from the side. „In any case,

whatever Christine has told you – stop, I don't want to hear any of it – is the truth in her eyes, and she has the right to that truth. Nothing I can tell you will make it any less true. So, what is this all about? Are you trying to get me imprisoned or not? If you are, this is not the wisest way to go about it."
„And you don't feel the need to justify your actions?"
„Justify? What exactly? Kidnapping? Psychological torture? Attempted murder? No, I do not need to justify any of that, thank you. Do you take me for an idiot?" he snapped.
„Not anymore", Amelija remarked, looking straight back at him.
„You can form whatever opinion of me you wish to", he rambled on furiously. „I can not change what happened, and I can not forget it, ever, for a single moment. I'd like not to be reminded of it if that's possible, as there is no need – „
„Does Alina know?" Amelija interrupted.
„Yes", he sighed.
„Really?"
„Yes. I told her everything. Your sister is not walking blindfolded into the monster's den. I would not do that to her." Well, that was not exactly true; he had been living with her for over a year before he told her – but at least he did tell her, and Amelija did not need to know exactly when.
„That is... picturesque", Amelija admitted. „Well, that's all I wanted to know. Alina is old enough to make her own decisions, as long as she has all the information. Mom and dad are welcome to find out anything she trusts them enough to tell them, for all I'm concerned", she shrugged.
„That's all?" Erik looked at her. „Was this talk really necessary?"
„Yes, I think I've heard enough to form my own opinion", Amelija smiled. Erik stared ahead, fighting a very harrowing internal battle between keeping his pride on one side and doing the wise thing - not losing a potentially valuable ally on the other.
„Thank you", he managed in the end.
„Pardon me?" Amelija heard very clearly what he was saying, but she preferred to savor this for another tiny moment.
„Thank you", he pulled out of himself slowly. „For... going along with it. Especially before."
„Oh, that, don't mention it", Amelija laughed. She could have gloated some more – she wanted to, it would not be beneath her – but she felt it would destroy her efforts to build a truce. „Alina's friends – honest friends – are

my friends as well."
They kept silent the rest of the way until they reached Jack's house.
Erik stopped in front of the door, turning to Amelija. He looked at her with curiosity for a moment before asking, "Is it impolite to have someone else return a book you borrowed? I honestly don't know." She felt a pang of annoyance again before realizing he was no longer mocking her - he seemed to be honestly asking.
"That depends on the situation", she shifted uncomfortably.
"And what is this situation where it's impolite?" He asked.
"It's not, I just wanted to..." Amelija blushed. "You really can't let things go, can you? Are you always so insufferably invasive?"
He merely looked back at her, his mouth spreading into a somewhat smug smile.
"Alright, fair enough, I suppose", she mumbled.
He let her stew for another second before saying, "You're right. I've known Jack for a while, and he values politeness very highly." He then turned around and knocked, staring straight at the door with that same slight smile on his face. Amelija heard rustling inside and felt her heartbeat quicken very slightly.
"What is Jack's favorite book, anyway?"
"White Fang", she replied, taking the book out of her bag.
"Oh, I know that one. Alina likes it."
"I bet", Amelija shrugged. "And you? What's your favorite book?"
He kept silent for a second.
"Life is a Dream", he said quietly.
"Pedro Calderón?" Amelija asked in wonder. "That's a play, not a novel-"
The door suddenly opened, revealing Jack standing behind it, his curly hair messy and wearing clothes a little more on the casual side than Amelija usually saw on him. He saw Erik and smiled, opening his mouth to ask what he wanted, and then blinked slightly when he noticed Amelija behind him.
"Hello, Jack", Erik said cheerfully, switching back to English. "We're here to return a book to you. At least she is. I'm actually in a hurry, bye."
He turned and walked away, leaving Amelija to stare at Jack frozen in absolute horror, holding White Fang in her hand.

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rik walked back across the island to his own house, very aware of how frayed his nerves were and how his fingers were still twitching in his pockets. He barely registered his surroundings until he entered through the front door, stopping to look at Alina who turned to look back at him. She had expected Amelija to come back alone after returning the book and Erik to stay and discuss whatever it was he wanted to discuss with Jack; she didn't expect to see him and certainly not looking like - that.
He crossed the distance between them in three very long steps and pulled her into a fierce hug.
What's going on? she wanted to ask but stopped herself, for now, hugging him back silently. She could feel his heartbeat through his jacket going from frantic to something resembling normal; Erik held her tighter as he closed his eyes and sighed softly into her neck. After a minute, he pulled away and started rummaging through the cupboards until he found the old bottle of rakija she kept on one of the shelves. She watched him as he opened the bottle and poured himself a generous amount into the glass.
"Maybe that's not- alright", she said as he downed it all and turned to her again, leaning on the counter.
"Your sister knows everything", he said, wiping his mouth. The horrifying, burning liquor was no easier to drink than the last time, but it numbed both the inside of his mouth and his mind.
Alina blinked. "Oh." She pulled a chair from the table and sat, looking at him.
"Antoinette told her", he clarified. "She's known for a while now." He hoped she wouldn't ask what exactly he was talking about; he wasn't eager to go into detail right now.
"I suppose that explains her behavior", she said, scratching her nose.
"What do you mean?"
"You were right. She's been uncharacteristically... guarded around you", she said. "I didn't know why, and I didn't want to upset you if I pointed it out. It's not like her; I mean, she's guarded around everybody but not like that."
"I thought it was for obvious reasons", he shrugged.
"Amelija is not an idiot", Alina growled. "And she's not shallow, no matter how much she likes pretending to be."

"Hm."
"What did she say? Was she... did she give you trouble about it?" she asked carefully.
"Objectively, no", he sighed, letting down the empty glass. "She wanted to talk to me openly to hear what I have to say about it all. Apparently, according to her, I passed whatever test of character she deemed necessary." He forced himself to look away from the glass and into Alina's eyes. "But for a moment, I thought I was doomed. I kept thinking she could have me locked up before I even knew what was happening, and shipped back to France in chains if she decided to do so." He swallowed. "Or... or take you back home, if your family decides I'm a threat to you."
"She'd never do that to me", Alina said, pouring a little bit of the liquor into the glass for herself and drinking it. "She's not a snitch. It's been an unbreakable rule, ever since we were kids, that we'd have each other's backs."
"She would have done it if she thought you were in danger, or delusional about me", he said quietly.
"But you've convinced her that I'm not", she smiled at him. "Well done. She doesn't trust people that easily."
Erik sighed deeply once again, closing his eyes for a moment. "I could have lost you", he whispered, looking to the side.
"Yes, if you hadn't done the right thing, you would have probably lost me one way or another", she said. "And yet, you have been doing the right things all along since you met me without thinking about it."
"I- alright", he sighed. It was pointless arguing about it – it would only make his head spin to imagine all the possible ways everything could have gone, or still go, disastrously. Even this infernal liquor was preferable to that particular torture, he mused as he poured himself a little bit more.
"You've warmed up to the brandy", Alina chuckled.
"It's destroyed enough of my mouth by now that I don't mind it", he said.
"Don't worry. I don't intend to turn it into a habit if that's what you're getting at."
"Balkan delicacies are an acquired taste, usually", she bit her lip, smiling mischievously.
"Except for one", he replied, pulling her slowly into his lap. "I can think of one I've liked since I first laid my eyes on her."
"Mhm?" she asked, smiling softly at him as she put her arms around his

neck. She was so close he could have counted her eyelashes.
"The name escapes me", he said as he closed the distance between them and kissed her.
After a few minutes, Alina pulled away slightly, looking somewhat flustered.
"No one will take me from you", she said, pressing her forehead to his. "I'd tear down half the world finding my way back."
"I'd tear through the other half looking for you."

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t was already dark when Amelija walked back to her sister's home. She had a strange feeling of someone watching her as she approached the house; she looked around to see what she was missing - there was nobody in sight until she went with a sudden burst of inspiration and looked up.
"Do you often just lounge on the roof like that?" she asked.
"Not anymore, now that everyone knows about it", Erik replied.
"Well, I apologize for accidentally invading your secret hiding place", she said. Amelija felt surprisingly drained from this whole day - her hat, a beautiful wide-brimmed piece of art adorned with tiny silk flowers, was itching and weighing on her scalp. She took out the hairpins holding them to her head, and took off the hat, shaking her long, honey-colored locks loose. She scratched a bit at her head, and when she looked back up at Erik there was a tiny bit of Alina in her cold green eyes once again.
"I suppose you're leaving, now that I'm back here", she said.
"No", he replied quietly, shaking his head. "I'm staying here."
"How so?"
"Alina asked me to stay", he said. There was another reason, but he wanted to wait a bit more before starting that subject.
"Ah. She's that persuasive?" Amelija grinned at him.
"Quite so. Why? Do you wish to know her secrets?" he grinned back. Something about Amelija made it hard to talk to her openly; but at the same time, something about her made it incredibly easy to joke and banter around to hide it.
"I'd say I don't need to. I have plenty of tricks up my sleeve."
"How are they working for you, these days?" he asked. "I'm afraid you've

stumbled upon someone who knows just as many. Do you have a new strategy now, or are you still grasping at straws to control the situation?"
Amelija opened her mouth to say something very rude but closed it again. He was right, and it threw her off balance - and throwing some weak insult back just to anger him would be beneath her.
"Love is not kind to people who like to control everything", he said, looking lost in thought. "I understand. But, from all I know about Jack, I'd say you have no reason to worry."
"Who said anything about love?" Amelija crossed her hands. It shook her how much it meant to her that people thought Jack's intentions with her were honest, but she had no intention of showing that to this ass. "What makes you think I'm not simply having fun?"
"Really? You don't seem to be having an ounce of fun, from my perspective", he laughed. "A whole lot of suffering, on the other hand."
"Have you come out here just to mock me?" Amelija snapped, her brow frowning sternly and voice icy-cold, hoping it would cover up how wet her eyes were feeling suddenly.
"No. I came here to apologize", he said quietly, his attention shifting back to her. "Regarding our previous conversation. I was not aware you'd known all this about me."
"So?" she raised an eyebrow.
"It casts a different light on your behavior", he continued, looking suddenly unsure. "It… provides a different explanation for your, uh, initial hostility toward me, then I had previously thought."
"Why did you think I disliked you, then?" Amelija asked in wonder.
He looked at her for a moment, not responding. From what little she could see of his expression, Amelija suddenly had a feeling he looked incredibly sad.
"In any case, I apologize. I have misjudged you and your character", he continued. "If I was in your place, knowing what you've known about me, I would not have come here without several dozen armed policemen."
"I was asked to give you the benefit of the doubt", she shrugged.
"Yes. Not many people would have obeyed that request." he stood up, climbed quickly down the roof, and stood next to her. "You remind me of someone I know."
"Is this about me and Jack being the same? Save it, I've heard it all from Alina", she scoffed.

"No, no", he waved his hand in obvious amusement. "You're not at all like Jack. Jack's been through hell, and knows exactly what he wants."
"Thank you", she gritted through her teeth.
"You remind me of a young nobleman I met once. Raoul de Chagny. Have you met him?"
"No... " she thought about it. Amelija was as good with names as she was with faces, and it didn't take her long to recall them. "Is that Christine's husband?"
"He had the same air of insufferable confidence and entitlement as you do", Erik smiled, bowing his head to her. "And he also spared my life once, when he had no reason to. Though I hardly repaid him fairly for it. Maybe I have misjudged Europe's crème de la crème, after all - maybe some of you are capable of understanding something other than yourselves."
"Is that your idea of a compliment?" Amelija snapped, feeling close to losing her goddamned temper.
"I don't know. Maybe I'm just mocking you", he replied sweetly.
"I might still change my mind about you", Amelija rolled her eyes as she entered the house.

Chapter 35:The Pianist

"You'll be pleased to hear that Beatrice has agreed to audition for your project", Heidel said to Erik with a satisfied half-smile the next time he came to his office. Heidel was enjoying this project a lot more than he would openly admit - he had sent notice to his colleagues to recommend him students and recent graduates that would be interested, and the list of names that was slowly being gathered brought joy to Heidel's heart. He was aware that some students, due to circumstances out of their control, were sometimes forced to abandon their musical careers before they had a chance to succeed- he'd seen it plenty of times in his life. He was toying with the prospect of using Erik's obvious weakness for underprivileged young people to correct some ancient injustices he'd witnessed - but had no intention of saying that so explicitly to him yet. "And, there's one more thing."

"Yes?" Erik replied politely.
"I'm aware we'd agreed I'd let you pick the soloists, and I still stand by it", Heidel said with a mask of nonchalance as he cleaned his glasses with the sleeve of his beautiful jacket. "But, I have a request. I'd like you to consider someone for the piano solo - an old student of mine, who has fallen on hard times."
"Oh", Erik managed as alarms set off in his head. He didn't like this at all - he wasn't used to compromising; he'd compromised more lately than ever before in his life, and he was secretly terrified of having even this small portion of the project that was under his direct control taken away from him.

"Now, I'm aware this is a lot I'm asking for", Heidel put his reading glasses back on his head. "The man we're asking for - requires some special treatment. His skills and theoretical knowledge, as well as creative expression, are incredible - however, he can't learn on his own. He can't

read musical notation, so he would require tutoring. Seeing as I've read your piano score, it seems to me you would be more than capable of teaching him his part - but I'm aware that it's a huge time investment, so I'm only asking that you consider it for now."
"He- can't read musical notation?" Erik stopped dead in his tracks. "I thought he was one of your students? In the Conservatory?"
"No. He graduated about ten years ago when this Conservatory was just getting started. He was my student, but back in the old Academy", Heidel said calmly. "He was supposed to become a pianist for the Philharmonic. Due to unforeseen circumstances, he never got in and began a solo career. He's working as the lobby pianist at the Waldorf hotel now, but I assume he's allowed to have side projects of his own."
"How did he even get to academy level without being able to read music or learn it on his own?" Erik blurted out. "Didn't he have to pass the same entrance exams as everyone else? The Academy does have them, doesn't it?" does the Academy slide its standards so low for people it deems favorable? How is this fair? How is Heidel alright with this? What is going on-
"He did pass them", Heidel said, smiling a slightly ominous smile. "With flying colors. For a short while, he was the best in his class."
"And now he plays background music in the lobby of some stuck-up hotel?" Erik rambled before he could stop himself. "What on Earth happened there? Did you have no other potential candidates for the piano department that year? Do his parents own the Academy building? It's that, isn't it? What happened to take Conservatory students and people who never had a chance before but would die to get one?"

Heidel looked at Erik with that same look that generations of former students still saw in their nightmares, and it would have chilled the blood in Erik's veins if he had any sort of common sense. Which he didn't.

"Young man, I have extended a certain courtesy and suspension of disbelief when I decided to give you this chance. If you wish for us to remain cooperative, you will extend the same courtesy and benefit of the doubt to your colleagues before you find it appropriate to judge them. Otherwise, you are very welcome to find your luck without me - the door is over there."

Erik sat in his seat, fuming silently. "And this- " giving a solo part to some entitled Academy dropout who needs a tutor for everything- "is simply a sacrifice I must make, I assume. Very well."
"You've misunderstood me", Heidel said calmly. "One, I don't insist that we take Oliver as our soloist - you are simply to give him a chance to audition, and I'm willing to give you my word that once you meet him you'll understand why he's valuable to have even despite his shortcomings."
Erik paused, remembering himself. "Alright, that is fair. I can give you my word. He will get an honest chance to prove himself."
"Two", Heidel added, "while things will be much clearer to you very soon, in the meantime I'd like you to keep your judgments of my former student's competence to yourself. You wouldn't want to say something you'll regret later."
"Alright", Erik said unsurely. Everything about this was suspiciously off. He wondered if he was a fool to think he'd have any control over this project once it was set in motion.
"I'll send a word to Mr. Riley", Heidel said, taking out a piece of paper. "I'll notify you when he's able to come. I expect him to be quite interested. I'll see you in a few days - for now, I'd like to be excused. I still have a lot of work to do."
"I had it under control", Erik growled with an obvious offense as he told the story later that day to Alina and Jack. The last time he had anything under control was at least five years ago, maybe never.
"Yes", Jack narrowed his eyes at him as Alina poured him another cup of coffee, wondering if he should maybe ask her to pour him some whiskey in it while she's at it. "You had it barely under control not to piss off Heidel entirely, great job. You're still an ass."
"How?" Erik insisted. "We had an agreement that I'd pick the soloists, and Heidel can pick everyone else if he wants. I agreed to give my salary to soloists instead if needed if we couldn't afford them. Why would he start pushing his agenda now, for some old Academy friend, when there are plenty of people in the Conservatory who'd die for this chance and might never get it again?"
"Because", Jack dragged his hands across his face. "I know Olly. It's… not what you think it is. We grew up together - that's how I met Fritz, they became friends when Olly graduated. It's complicated."
"How is it so complicated? He got into the Academy, which was a chance

enough - had a seat ready for him at the Philharmonic - and now he's playing at Waldorf. It's not exactly per Aspera, you know, it seems to me like his path was laid out to him from the start."
"Oh, for a time it was", Jack shrugged. "I've known Olly all my life.
He was quite full of himself as a kid - it was always obvious how massively talented he was for music, and how great he would be one day. It was a massive loss for the Academy that he left - that being said", he raised his hand when Erik opened his mouth to protest, "I won't be telling you his life story behind his back, as I wouldn't tell yours. You'll have to meet him and see for yourself, and that's it."
The man Heidel pointed at stood in front of the main entrance quite still, a little too still, as if he was wary he might knock something over if he moved too suddenly. He looked quite unremarkable - a messy mop of brown hair under a plain hat, clean-shaven with a grey suit, seemingly in his mid-thirties. He held an elegant cane in his right hand, but something about it seemed slightly off - for one, he wasn't leaning on the cane at all, and it looked a little too beaten-up to be a fashion accessory as if he bumped it into something hard one too many times.

"Olly, hi", Heidel called him as they approached. The man turned his face to the direction of the sound and as they stopped to face him Erik suddenly understood, he understood Heidel's behavior and why the man was standing so still and careful, waves of shock and shame coursing through him as he looked into the man's eyes that stared emptily a little to his left. His irises were pale, nearly white, grey-blue, and the pupils were an equally pale, murky, clouded grey color.
Blind. The man was blind, and Erik felt like the most ignorant, terrible person in the world.
He stared silently at the man in shock for a little too long. If Antoinette was present, she would probably have nudged his shoulder and called him rude.
"Hello, Maestro", the man - Olly - smiled at Heidel, extending his arm slightly. Heidel took it, and the man turned in Erik's general direction.
"And, mister - ?"
"E-Erik", Erik managed, then coughed slightly. "I'm Erik." he was too distraught to remember he did have a last name now.
"Nice to meet you, Erik", the man said with a matter-of-fact cheerfulness.
"I'm Oliver Riley, as my colleague might've told you, but everyone calls me

Olly."
Heidel laughed but didn't comment on the fact someone half his age - his former student - had just called him his colleague. He opened the front door, letting Oliver - who seemed to have no problem orienting himself - through the front lobby and narrow staircase into his office. Erik followed silently behind them, unsure what to do.
"You're a fellow musician, Erik, or so I heard?" Oliver said, not turning to face him as they walked. It was possible, Erik realized, he had trouble pinpointing where he was seeing as Erik had the habit of moving so silently.
"I'd like to think that", he said quietly. Maybe if I walked a little louder, it would help him? I'm not sure I know how to do that without making it obvious.
The man chuckled. "Very modest of you. I'll assume you didn't get a chance to be spoiled by our esteemed and prestigious conservatories."
"No, I only moved here a year and a half ago", Erik admitted. He didn't want to say anymore, so he thought for a second. "Did you?"
"New York Academy of Music", the man said proudly. "Yankee, born and raised. Perhaps it's better that you didn't - it goes to your head, being there, especially if you're good. You start thinking you're king of the world until life humbles you."
"Oh", Erik replied.
"Where are you from?" Oliver asked again.
"France."
"I wouldn't have guessed! You don't have an accent at all. You must have a real talent for languages."
Erik didn't exactly know how to respond to that or why people kept telling him that, but he had a weak spot for people flattering him. He felt the muscles in his shoulders relax a little bit. Oliver kept chatting - after a few years of working in a hotel lobby, he could lead a conversation with anyone about anything and had never possessed any real shyness or modesty anyway.
Heidel led them into his office, telling them to sit. Erik waited for the man to sit, trying very hard not to get in his way, then sat opposite of him, with Heidel on his right forming a sort of triangle. Heidel poured them each a small glass of whiskey.
"How's the missus, Olly?" he asked.
"Oh, she's doing well", the man replied, his face lighting up slightly. "I've

told you she's been pestering me to get a dog?"
"Yes", Heidel laughed. "Did you finally cave?"
"Oh, yes. Against my better judgment, too. Truth be told, I thought it would be much more of a bother than it is - she mostly takes care of it herself. A German shepherd - yes, I know, wouldn't expect it from her, hah! But she wanted that one specifically. Intelligent animal! It's like having a very friendly wolf at home - but she's been so happy about it, I don't mind it. I sometimes take it out on walks, and it's already learned how to let me know if I'm about to bump into something. I only wish the damn animal would stop chewing on my slippers, but I guess that's my cross to bear in exchange for domestic peace." He looked over to Erik, wanting to include him. "Do you know what I'm talking about, Erik?"
"No, not exactly", he admitted. Or lied? He wasn't sure.

"Not married yourself, are you?" Oliver took a sip of whiskey.
"No… No, I'm not." Erik coughed, reminding himself a blind man could not see the obvious so he was most definitely not mocking him.

"Ah", Oliver laughed a hearty laugh. "Pardon me, then. I must have bored you with my tales of domestic bliss - I only got married a year ago, so it's still all very fascinating to me."
"Oh", Erik said. Oliver smiled slightly, and the three of them sat in silence for a moment as Erik pondered if it was maybe time for him to leave, and throw me in a ditch in shame.
"Well, it's nice meeting another musician", Oliver spoke again, "but I was under the impression that Maestro had something specific in mind when he invited us here. Am I wrong?"
Heidel looked over to Erik, raising his eyebrows. It was his project - and he was expected to represent it whether he liked it or not. Heidel had had many students over the years, and he was always adamant that he wouldn't be holding his protege's hand as they made their first real steps into the musical scene. It was true for young men and women struggling with completing their compositions or mastering a particularly difficult piece, and it would be true for this young man who seemingly could write and play music with rarely seen ease and mastery, and yet sometimes couldn't piece together a coherent, regular-length sentence to save his soul.
Erik paused, trying to find the right words. "I… Maestro Heidel told me

you were a good pianist."
"That's an understatement", Heidel said proudly. "Olly was the best pianist in his generation, and one of the best students I've had. He's still one of the best you'll find in New York City."
"You're just saying that because you like me", Oliver laughed. "I haven't been top of the game in years. Since I've lost my sight, I've only played what I already knew before. It's not realistic to expect someone will sit with me and teach me - I can't read sheet music, obviously", he shrugged.
"Does that not bore you?" Erik blurted out before he could stop himself. The man raised his eyebrows, then smiled at him with new interest.
"It did, of course", he replied. "Which is why these days I don't play at large concert halls anymore. I'm good at improvising - not much of a composer in the real sense, but I can improvise fairly well on the spot, so I mostly work in fancy galleries, and museums, currently at the Waldorf hotel. You know, events like that. They'll let you play anything that sounds good, and they pay good money. Really good money. There's a sort of liberty to it."
"Do they listen?" Erik asked. "Then - the people there, do they listen to you?"
"They are polite, but they mostly don't understand a damn thing", Olly admitted. "Occasionally, I can tell when someone feels the music the way we do - they are the ones who listen. Sometimes, someone will come to me and tell me they liked it. But it doesn't matter, you know?" he shrugged apologetically.
"How come?" Erik pressed.
"Because I play for myself. I play because it's fun." he waved his hand dismissively. "Music is just a game - I used to think it was a competitive game, where you play all the moves perfectly, better than anyone else, and win. But the older I am, the less I think so. It's just a fun game, a box full of colorful blocks to be arranged into castles however you like it. It's all I need it to be, frankly. I have no ambition to educate the masses on the virtues and exquisite suffering of Liszt and Rachmaninoff if they don't want to hear about it - I like it better if we all have fun. Mostly me, to be honest."
"Ah", Erik said.
"You don't agree?" Olly laughed.
"I don't know. Maybe I do. Though "fun" would not be the first word I'd use to describe it."
"No? And what is music to you, then?" Olly asked. His carefree, friendly

demeanor was throwing Erik off his track. He had never really encountered someone who treated him this way - people, even well-meaning people, could not simply unsee how strange he looked and moved and acted; he could sense the unease even people like Alina felt around him when they first met him. Even those who were polite were usually very reserved.
But this man had simply no way of knowing how strange Erik was - he was just another fellow musician to him, nervously struggling to have a polite chat with a blind man without accidentally offending him.
Is this how Alina felt around me when we met? Is that why she acted so strange then? Erik felt the enormous strain on his mind from trying to overthink everything he said so it wouldn't accidentally offend the man before him. He suddenly felt the need to go home and hug her very, very tightly.
"I don't know, I, I'm not sure I have words for it", he fumbled. Well, he sure didn't have them now - even if he did like the friendly man before him, even if he tried to tell him something so personal, it would not have come out of him just so easily. If he tried too hard he might just forget every word he ever learned.
"Maybe then I could hear you play sometime. Maestro tells me you're not only a composer but also a violinist", Olly tapped his fingers on his cane as he spoke. "If you have a concert soon, tell me, I'd like to come."
"Olly, that's something we wanted to talk to you about", Heidel coughed, re-joining the conversation. He would have much rather let them talk in peace and observe - Erik's confused stumbling was particularly amusing to him after their last talk - but he had a feeling if he didn't bring it up, Erik would never muster the courage. "Erik is preparing a performance of his symphony. We're looking for a solo pianist, and I recommended you."
"Oh." Oliver frowned in surprise for the first time. "Really?"

"As I said, you're one of the best students I've ever had."
"Not sure what to think about that", he turned to Erik. "As I said, I can no longer read sheet music. I'd need a tutor to teach me - someone has to play it to me little by little so I can repeat and learn. For a whole symphony, that's a whole lot of work, even though my memory is very good. And let me tell you, you should think beforehand if you're ready to do that. I still think too highly of myself to let myself be someone's burden."
"I understand", Erik said. "I- I do." Oh, you have no idea how much I

understand, he wanted to tell him, but something told him it would not be a good idea. Do I?
"And you have to find someone who will teach me exactly how it should be played on stage because I can't see the conductor's signals."
"Yes, obviously", Erik said. "It would have to be me."
"That seems like the logical solution, yes." Olly paused. "It's a lot of work. You should think it over."
"My music is not fun", Erik blurted out. "It's… not. And neither am I."
Olly leaned back in his chair. "Alright. Perhaps we should hear each other play first, and then we'll decide. Worst case scenario, we'll both learn something new and go on our merry ways."
Erik nodded, then felt his cheeks getting hot when he remembered the man couldn't see it. "Yes. alright."
"But now I'm curious - if it's not fun, what is it then? Avant-garde? Dissonant? Solemn? How would you characterize it? Am I about to hear some of that heavy, high-class art I've been evading for the past years?"
"I, I honestly don't know", Erik said. "I…"
"What?"
"It's just important to me."
Oliver nodded in silence for a second, then stood up. "Maestro, is your piano still where I left it last time?"
Heidel laughed. "Waiting just for you as always."
"I guess this whiskey will be my salary for today. I am a fool for challenges." Oliver walked over to the door and opened it, pausing at the doorway. "Are you gentlemen not gonna come with me?"
"I have some work to do", Heidel said. "I'm sure Erik can manage this audition on his own."
Erik shrugged at Heidel. He wasn't too sure who was auditioning whom here, but the fewer people were present in the room, the better for him. He followed Oliver down the hallway to the classroom that held Heidel's piano.
"Erik?" Oliver turned as he walked.
"Yes?" Erik asked from right behind him, and the man jumped a little as he turned to him.
"Ah, good, you're still here. I wasn't sure. You're so quiet."
"Sorry. Yes." Erik would normally get properly offended by this man being startled by him, but he was still too distressed by the whole situation. If he can't hear me, he has no way of knowing I'm there. I might as well be a

ghost haunting him. He doesn't know. He might never know. Heidel never told him-

"Have you heard American music yet, Erik?" Oliver asked as he opened the door to the classroom.

"Some of it. A little."

"Get ready, then." Oliver opened the lid and cracked his knuckles, sitting down at the piano. Erik followed, wondering if he should bother turning on the light. He had been in this room before and knew its general outlines, not to mention he could see quite well in the near-dark. Closing the door behind him, he decided to see what would happen if he simply left it as it was. He could play better in the dark, after all.

He sat on one of the chairs behind Oliver and waited. The pianist started with a few scales and etudes to warm up - quite boring, but he played with a sort of enthusiasm and cheer that made them bearable. It went on for a few minutes, then he shifted without warning to a composition Erik knew. It was a short piece by Schubert - sweet and upbeat, and Oliver played it with all the humor of someone playing his favorite game. Erik thought he could hear slight irony, a cheerful and somewhat mocking tone in his playing. This is your precious, high art. I can do this flawlessly, but I don't think very highly of it, to be honest, the old piano sang. Then it changed again.

Erik couldn't pinpoint exactly when it changed, but it slowly started to shift. The melody stayed the same, but the harmonies started shifting, the tempo would slow down and speed up again until it varied so much it was nothing like the mold it grew from. Then he heard bits and pieces of other works - some famous, some so incredibly obscure he couldn't properly remember what they were exactly, and that was only the beginning. The style changed as well; going from the classical German piece it originally was to something much more modern, loud, fast, and full of life. Erik had heard street musicians in New York; he knew what modern music sounded like - but this was unlike any of that, something new and existing of its own. The hustle of the New World, enthusiasm and ambition, giant skyscrapers and wide avenues, hordes of people all talking loudly, perched defiantly on a skeleton of posh, stuck-up, old-fashioned forms and schemes. Classical music, interpreted by someone who loved it so much he could criticize and poke fun at it without hesitation, someone who knew it so well he could make something of his own and still keep in it a reference to his roots.

Defiant, challenging, bright happiness that laughed in the face of the darkness and misery of the world - clinking, clanging, ever-changing. You cannot catch me, it seemed to tell Erik. I become whatever I wish to be. I am free. There's darkness all around me, yet here I am, laughing at its face. It was the furthest thing he could imagine from his work, and he fell in love with it immediately.
Oliver finished with a smooth and bold glissando, then rested his hands on his lap and chuckled.
"This is what I sound like, most of the time. Not quite hochmusik, but it makes money."
"Beautiful", Erik managed. "Incredible. I've never heard someone willingly butcher and deconstruct everything I hold dear, then put it back together again in such a mesmerizing collage. How the hell did you do that?"
"I just don't take myself seriously, I suppose?"
"Do you take anything seriously?"
"A few things, but not Schubert." Oliver laughed. "Alright, then, will you show me what you expect from your pianist to perform?"
"Right." Erik stood up so they could switch places. "To be honest, I only recently started practicing again on a harpsichord so I might be a little rusty. And I'm still changing some things, so I'll play you some parts that might interest you."
"Alright", Oliver Riley said, all of his previous laughter and cheer gone. "Alright, I understand what you meant. This is not fun music."
Erik lowered his hands, staring at the barely-visible piano keyboard. "No." he didn't know what to make of that. If the man didn't like it, he could just say so, and Erik would much prefer if he said it quickly and openly.
"It's also very complex. Might be quite difficult to learn."
"Yes."
"But it's important to you." Oliver tapped his fingers on his cane. "It feels very personal. I think you might have just told me your whole life. Are you sure you want this performed on stage?"
"I…" Erik trailed off. "I'm not always certain it should be performed on stage or that anyone should hear it, but I'm certain I want it, yes."
"Well", Oliver took a slow breath. "I'm not easily surprised, and I think I've had a fairly broad and deep education when it comes to music. But I gotta admit I'm slightly taken aback by this. This has to be one of the most beautiful things I've ever heard. No, it's not fun, because fun is fleeting and

lighthearted. This is - heavyhearted, hah. And it's important. It's not boring."
Erik swallowed. "I- thank you."
"I'll play it."
"Oh." Erik blinked. "Oh. Really?"
"Yes."
"How come? Considering everything?"
"Because I understand it", Oliver nodded. "I understand it, and I can do it right. And I should be the one to do it."
"And you won't butcher it like Schubert?" Erik smiled. "Or will you just start playing something of your own in the middle of the opening night?"
"I knew most of Schubert by heart before I started butchering him", Oliver laughed, clicking his cane against his shoe. "Do you think I could make it so much fun if I didn't love him so much?"
"Do you wanna walk with me?" Oliver turned to Erik slowly as they said goodbye, left Heidel's office, and walked out into the busy street. "If you happen to be going the same way."
"Huh?" Erik turned back to him.
"Yeah, I'd just like to chat, get to know each other before we get to business. Granted, I'll need a little bit of help when we cross the street, but don't feel obligated if you're in a hurry."
"Alright", Erik said, a bit confused. "Where do you need to go?"
"My apartment is two blocks from here. I'll navigate you."
"Do you know the way by heart?" Erik asked curiously.
"Don't you know the way from your home to your favorite places by heart?" Oliver laughed. "I bet you do, you just don't know it."
"Maybe", Erik conceded. He walked carefully next to Olly, whose cane made a click-click-click sound against the pavement.
"How're you liking the Big Apple?" Oliver asked cheerfully.
"What?"
"The Big Apple, New York. That's what they call it. You didn't know? Guess if you're a foreigner you probably didn't."
"Uh, I didn't. It's fine", Erik said. "Noisy."
"Noisy is true", Oliver laughed. "Just noisy? Nothing else?"
"The skyscrapers are unnerving to me. Everything here is too big in general. But…" he paused. "It seems a lot less stiff than where I'm from. People say things more openly, and that's easier. And my, that is, Alina is very loud and talkative as well, so she's fitting right in."

"It's very nice to see her happy, isn't it?"
"It is."
They reached the crossing, and for a moment Erik thought the man wouldn't stop - he reached out without thinking and grabbed his sleeve gently.
"Stop", he said quietly.
"Yes, I know." Oliver turned to him, raising his eyebrow. "I can hear just fine. Just tell me if something very fast tries to pass me before I can react."
"Sorry."
"I'm not offended." he went silent as they crossed to better hear the traffic and continued talking when they were safe on the sidewalk again. "I would've been fine on my own. I can always ask anybody who's around for help."
"Do they help you?" Erik asked, surprised by the genuine concern in his voice - Oliver must have noticed it as well, as he smiled slightly.
"Yes, yes. Anyway, I just wanted to talk to you a little bit", he said, "about the job. The symphony, that is. You only played a small part of it today."
"Yes."
"It's not all like that, is it?"
"No."
"That's what I thought. It has a certain something to it. It's about despair, isn't it? I can recognize it. A lot of despair and loneliness. Trapped in a black world, with no escape, no hope of ever seeing the light again." The man spoke in a casual tone like he was a doctor describing death he knew so well it stopped frightening him long ago.
Erik shifted. "That is... Yes. Correct."
"I can recognize it when I hear it by now. And I can also guess how it ends, or at least I think I can, but I want to ask you. Is that alright?"
"How do you think it ends?" Erik turned to him with curiosity.
"It sounds to me like there's a voice going through it, insisting that the darkness isn't as absolute as it seems. I can tell some parts of it were added or changed later. Like the person who wrote it, doesn't fully believe in it anymore. The parts you wrote later don't have the same conviction. Am I right in guessing that love wins in the end?"
"It's just an instrumental composition", Erik fumbled. "Maybe it isn't that elaborate. Maybe I just changed some things because I thought it sounded better that way."
"Don't play dumb with me. You know exactly what I'm talking about. Does

love win in the end or not?"
"Yes. It does", Erik whispered. "I haven't finished it yet, but yes, it does."
"Ah. Good. I wouldn't have agreed to it otherwise." Oliver stopped. "This is my building."
"Alright, I'll see you at practice then", Erik said, realizing he was still holding the man's sleeve and releasing him quickly. "Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't want anyone to hurt y- sorry, I mean, I was just trying to help." Between saying one-word sentences and saying full, but idiotic sentences, which one embarrasses me more?
"Yes, I know. You're an alright fellow. I'm glad the darkness didn't swallow you." Oliver nodded at him and took out his keys. "I wouldn't have agreed otherwise. Life has too many stories about despair, and it's getting boring already. I can play your sad symphony, but I wanted a happy ending. Maybe that makes my taste juvenile - I don't care. I like that you changed it. I think it makes more sense this way." he opened the door and waved in Erik's general direction. "Have a nice day."
"You too", Erik replied. After the man disappeared behind the heavy door, he softly added, "It's not juvenile at all."
As Erik walked back home, hot shame washing over him again, he tried to make sense of what happened.
I'm a bastard.
Well, he didn't know the man was blind, and honestly, how could he have guessed? He may have jumped to the conclusion Oliver Riley was just another rich boy who finished the Academy on his daddy's money and never properly learned music, but why had it never occurred to him there might have been a different side to the story?
Because I assumed everyone else is normal and I'm the only one unnatural.
Why would Jack not prepare him for this?
Didn't I ask Jack and Heidel not to tell people about me? Didn't I specifically tell Jack I didn't want this to be the first thing people learn about me? Would it be that much of a stretch to assume Oliver feels the same?
Erik looked at his hand once again, remembering how it held on to the pianist's sleeve. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Condescending. Even blind, he knows his way around New York better than I do. If someone acted this way toward me, I'd have told them off long ago. Instead, he just tells me I'm an alright fellow and agrees to play my music.

But I didn't feel sorry for him. I just wanted him to be safe.
And another, much more warm and beautiful thought invaded because he's wonderful.
Erik normally hated people touching him - with very few, obvious exceptions - and he never touched them first, especially strangers, if he could avoid it. He could always see the wall between him and them - the unspoken truth that he was hideous, abnormal, or simply strange and unpredictable, and so he never really bothered to tear that wall down anymore. He always thought other people getting too close was downright dangerous to him a lot more than it was to them.
Oliver Riley has no way of knowing any of that about me. He just talked to him like any other man - no, a fellow musician, to make things even better. He just assumed Erik was a musician who came from a distant land and underprivileged schooling, but an equal nevertheless.
And Erik, petrified by sadness at the thought of a man who could no longer do what he loved most because he couldn't read the notes, apparently threw all reason out the window and attempted to do what some small, deep, childish part of him felt the need to do: protect the kind, blind man from an uncaring world.
He entered his house to find Alina already back home, along with, unsurprisingly, Jack who had come to wait for Amelija.
"You should have told me he can't see", he frowned at Jack.
"So he is blind?" Alina asked. "I assumed it might be something like that."
"Did you embarrass yourself?" Jack asked with the sweet, angelic grin he usually saved for when Erik made an absolute ass of himself.
"I think so. I was just trying to help."
"Eh, then it's probably fine. Olly looks all sweet, but if you'd offended him he'd have told you to piss off."
Back at his house, Olly put his cane back and shrugged off the jacket of his suit.
"Camila, darling, I'm home", he called, making his way toward the kitchen. The dog, Poppy, walked over to him slowly, nudging his hand to pet her on the head.
"What's new with Heidel?" Camila came from the kitchen, kissing her husband's cheek.
"Well, they offered me a job. Some poor guy wants to assemble a small orchestra to play his symphony, but he's completely unknown and has no

connections, and he desperately needs soloists. So desperately, that he's willing to teach me the symphony little by little so I can perform." Oliver laughed, and his wife pinched him.
"No, he wants you because you're the best. Shut up."
"I am, aren't I? But I'm better when I'm improvising. Still, it will be nice to play some new, serious hochmusik for a change." he shook his head. "It's incredible. I'll get you a ticket for the concert, you have to hear it."
"Are you okay with learning like that? If the guy's a prick, you can always quit", Camila said. She'd always had a very no-nonsense attitude; trouble, in her opinion, was much better prevented than dealt with after it had a chance to grow.
"Camila, you should've met the guy. At first, I thought he was kind of stuck up - barely talked, terrible manners. But I'm not sure anymore. We walked two blocks together, and he held on to my sleeve like you'd think he'd stop the whole traffic if he could, just so I could pass."

Chapter 36: Somnolalia

Amelija settled down by the table in the kitchen/living room/all-purpose room, taking her book and a glass of water. The night was hot and humid; after trying to fall asleep and jolting up in sweat for a few hours she decided to finally end her agony and give up. She opened White fang and tried to focus her overheated, tired mind, humming a song softly enough that no one would hear her. Or no one should have heard her, but someone did. She was just starting to get involved and lose sight of her surroundings when the door to Erik's room opened quietly and a tall, lanky figure walked over calmly and slowly before settling down on a chair across from her. He looked at her with silent curiosity, unmoving for a few moments.

Amelija, completely frozen, stared into the eyes that shone deep from the middle of absolute nightmarish horror that caught her completely off guard and stopped singing.
The yellow eyes from sunken, dark-encircled sockets looked at her half-open with relaxed innocence and a black mass of hair hung strangely endearingly from his head, brushing against his cheekbones. If it wasn't for that, she wouldn't be entirely certain if the face she was staring at belonged to a living man. The skin was stretched across bony, jutting cheekbones and then wrinkled across sunken cheeks; the face seemed to have very little tissue on it, resembling a patch of skin pulled over a skull, with a thin, narrow, bony nose in the center that lacked cartilage in places. The skin itself was also... wrong somehow, so thin it was nearly translucent with visible veins and giant patches of what seemed to be scar tissue. Raised scars, sunken scars, mangled skin and discoloration, scars that looked to be ancient, a decade old at least, but seemed somehow still very much alive.

The dim candlelight and the sharp shadows it cast weren't too kind to him, either. She felt a pang of sorrow beneath her terror. He held out one of his wrists - also covered in mangled, scarred skin - and showed it to her.

"How does it look?" he asked in French.
Amelija stared, petrified, scared out of her mind. She felt like she was in a dream - or a story, one of those horror stories her cousins used to tell under bedsheets on stormy nights, where you encounter a monster alone in the dark and it kills you if you say the wrong thing - what was the right thing to say here? The people in those stories usually died anyway.
What kind of madness is this? Where is Alina? Is she alright?
Silence reverberated thunderously in the room, making her claustrophobic, making her sick.
"Is it better?" he continued. "I think it's healed. Please tell me, Antoinette, I can't bear to look at it myself."
"It's... it's healed", Amelija managed, also speaking in French. His eyes looked strangely clouded.
"The rot is gone", he said. "I thought it was part of me."
"Uh..." she couldn't think of anything to say to that. What does one say to that?
"I think", he continued, "I think you healed me. Potatoes on a plate on a table. And peas, scattered over the floor." he sighed. "The rot inside is still here. That rot might be forever."
Amelija nodded slightly, staring at him wide-eyed, too scared to either agree or disagree. One wrong step might lead to disaster, but the place I'm standing on isn't crumbling yet. Best to stay here.
"You're so silent", he remarked. "You're always telling me I should talk more. So I came here to talk."

"I never said - that is", Amelija coughed a little, catching up to what was going on. "What did you want to talk about?"

"I don't know", he said with calm innocence. "What do people talk about?"
"Boring things, mostly", Amelija replied the first thing that came to mind. "But I don't think you're the kind of person who talks about boring things."
"Do you think so? Things are boring", he said. "Often. Most of the time. And then sometimes, they are very sharp."
"That's... technically not untrue", she said slowly. "What things are sharp?"
"White fangs. Darkness. Your eyes", he said. "Scary."
Amelija felt kind of offended that it was her eyes that were scary in this situation.

"What do you want from me?" she asked, getting slightly desperate.
"Nothing", he replied with slight confusion. "I don't want anything, I'm just here. Erik wants things. I just want to live."
"Are you not Erik?" she asked, feeling herself getting panicked. She was starting to think again this wasn't some benign sleepwalking, but something more.
"Usually I am, but not right now", he said.
"And now you are?"
"Just a ghost."
"Ah."
Amelija endured one more moment of silence before she decided she might as well ask what she wanted to ask, seeing as she wasn't entirely sure she would get out of this alive anyway.
"What happened with the girl?" she blurted out.
"The girl? That girl?", he repeated slowly. "Erik wanted her. I didn't care. But he wanted her so badly he thought he would die of it, so I had to get her. I just wanted to live."
"And now?" she asked. "Would you do the same again?"
"Now he wants to live, so I don't have to."
"And if he didn't? If she left?"
"He might die. But he'd surely die if I hurt her", he said with the same dreamy serenity. "She sees me in passing, shadows, and words she doesn't understand. He won't let me get her if he can't get her himself. So it's all up to her. It's making him nervous."
"I... I see", Amelija said. She was fifteen kinds fed up with this conversation, but she didn't dare say the wrong thing in case she upset him and woke him up.
Something told her he wouldn't be this calm if that happened.
The door opened again, and Alina came out, calling her silently over with a gesture of her hand.
"Don't worry", she said barely audibly in Croatian. "It's alright, come here."
"I'll be right back." Amelija stood up, very slowly, and walked across the room, halfway expecting him to lunge at her. But he did nothing - he just sat peacefully, his elbow on the table and his head resting on his hand, and patiently waited for her.
"What in God's name is going on?" She hissed as she reached Alina.
"Nothing", she waved her hand. "He's just sleepwalking. It started recently.

Slightly confusing, but it's better than the nightmares he used to have. What did he say?"
"Just nonsense", Amelija shrugged. She wasn't one to betray her friend in a moment of embarrassment.
"That's alright. I'll just get him back." Alina walked over slowly to the ghost and sat at the table next to him.
"Darling", she said, moving a strand of hair from his forehead. "would you like to come with me?"
"To America?" He asked, switching over seamlessly to English.
"Sure", she smiled. "Anywhere in the world you want."
"I've never been anywhere. He doesn't like the world."
"That's not a problem. We're going somewhere nice."
"He wants to go, but he doesn't want you to know", he admitted. "Too proud."
"Why?" She tilted her head slightly.
"I don't know. I don't understand... pride. Or want."
Amelija watched the whole exchange from a distance. Even in the dim light, she could see his expression softening a little when he looked at Alina.
"Well, but he is asleep right now", Alina said. "So you can come with me. He's too proud for his good. He has no idea what he wants."
"An adventure", he nodded. Alina stood up, taking his hand as she stifled a laugh. This was all too endearing for her. The ghostly figure followed after her, stopping in front of Amelija again.
"White fangs and pride", he said to her, again in French. "I don't understand."
"Alright", she narrowed her eyes at him. She was starting to suspect he was learning how to mock her even in his sleep.
"Do you understand? I think you don't", he remarked, disappearing soundlessly into the darkness of the room as Alina closed the door, mouthing silently "thank you" at her.
A minute later, as Amelija settled down to read again, the door opened one more time with Alina's head peeking through.
"I don't suppose I have to tell you never to mention this again - "
"Don't insult me", Amelija hissed.

Chapter 37: Patience

"What are you doing?" Piotr asked. He was playing peacefully on the floor of Erik's living room as Erik worked. They were alone for the day - Alina and Amelija were out, Yana was still at work, and Piotr was happily enjoying Erik's company in silence until now. He often liked just being there and being allowed in the room while Erik worked, with of course the added benefit of hearing him play interesting music in the background. Erik also didn't mind Piotr while he worked - occasional questions and requests were, of course, unavoidable; still, Piotr would usually withdraw after getting a certain amount of attention he wanted and do something on his own. Erik liked his company for reasons he couldn't quite put into words, not even to himself.

"I'm working. I'm rehearsing this part so I can teach my soloist to play it", he rambled absentmindedly. "It has to be very clear what I want him to do, I don't have the patience to explain everything at length to him."

"Your what?"

"Soloist. Solo musician. It's like - you know how stories have main characters? Like Tsarevich Ivan?"

"Um. I guess."

"Like that. He is the main character, but he plays piano."

"He is like Tsarevich Ivan? Who are you?" comparisons like that were a bit too advanced for Piotr to understand how exactly the pianist was like Tsarevich Ivan, but he enjoyed asking questions that made Erik ramble. When he rambled, he forgot to filter himself so that Piotr would understand him, which could get very interesting.

"Uh", Erik stuttered as his hand slipped. "I- I'm not a character. I hope. I'm the writer." he paused for a second, then started to laugh. "You know how to throw me off balance with these questions. I don't know what to tell you. I used to think I was born to be a villain, but now I don't even know anymore. We'll talk about it when you're older."

"Sure", Piotr shrugged, his attention has already moved back to his toys.

"Actually", Erik looked at his watch. "I should go to work soon. I'm supposed to meet Oliver at six. Where is your mom? She was supposed to be back by now."

"I dunno. She's working." Piotr shrugged.

"Still?" Erik blinked in confusion. "Wasn't she supposed to work until four? Or- is today Wednesday?"

Piotr looked at him with confusion. How was he supposed to know?

"Oh. Oh my god. Yana works longer on Wednesdays. It's been a while, and I completely forgot", Erik stood up and started pacing around, rubbing his temples. "She won't be home until after six, and I can't leave Oliver waiting - it's his first day, he can't start without me - I can't send him a note, it's too late- oh. I'm so, so stupid. I could have just told her or told Alina, and someone would have stayed with you. I don't even know where Alina is right now, because I wasn't paying attention when she told me." stupid, stupid - you can't just withdraw into your head whenever you find a pet obsession anymore, not when people are counting on you - not when it's Piotr -

"I don't know what I'm going to do", he turned to Piotr, "but don't worry. I'm not going to just leave you alone. I'll figure this out." he had no idea what or how he would figure out, to be honest.

"Can I go with you?" Piotr asked plainly. He was aware that Erik was panicking, and didn't know how to feel about it; it was starting to make him nervous as well.

"I- I don't know. We would have to make sure nobody sees you - I don't think it's exactly allowed, so you'd have to be quiet. And I'll have to write a note for your mom, so she knows where to find you when she's done with work… I'm not sure I can take you all the way there, and I don't think it's a fun place for a little boy-"

"Jack takes me with him", Piotr suggested, smiling like a little angel.

"Oh, he does?" Erik looked at him. "I presume you two have a good time while I'm busy?"

"Mhm. Carries me around. He said I'm always good", Piotr was still smiling back at him, almost unbearably cute. "He tells my mom. Ask her."

"Well, I suppose I wouldn't want to refuse you something that Jack allows you to do. God forbid if you started spending more time with him than me", Erik tore his gaze from Piotr and remarked in a slightly sour tone, gathering his papers and collecting them into a folder.

Piotr said nothing, still smiling.

"You are the world's most vicious manipulator", Erik pointed his finger down without looking at him. "You won't be this cute forever, so take advantage of it while you can."

"Mom says I'm almost too big to carry", Piotr leaned on his palms to steady himself as he got up from the floor. "Am I too big to carry?"

"To Manhattan?" Erik thought about it. "Well, it wouldn't be very practical - I have to carry my folder too, and it's not that close."

"Jack carries me on his back", Piotr pointed his finger at Erik's shoulders. "Says that's easier."

"Huh", Erik looked at him in thought. Yes, it would probably be easier to carry him on his back but there were a million reasons not to do it, a million reasons why he didn't want to do it, and why it would overall be a bad idea. "You know, my back is kind of… not right as it should be, so to speak."

"What does that mean? Does it hurt?"

Oh, it did. "Uh, no, but it's not very comfortable when people touch it. It stings." he had no idea how to explain it to a child - while his back didn't physically sting, the scarred tissue on his upper body was somewhat sensitive and - a much bigger problem - his mind usually started screaming in alarm when people touched it for too long. It would usually subside, with some time, but he was also afraid he might drop Piotr or harm him in that jittery-alert state.

"Oh, I didn't know. Sorry." Piotr gathered his things. "I can walk. Don't be sad."

"No, goddamnit, you won't walk. Get over here."

"You know what's funny?" Erik remarked at Piotr who held on with his arms around Erik's neck and his chin on Erik's shoulder, blissfully content. A lot of things were funny, such as the fact Erik's back, which was now carrying Piotr, was scarred so thoroughly that a year ago it wouldn't occur to him to carry the child this way; or the fact Piotr was very obviously delighted to cling onto Erik and follow him around, or the fact Erik felt alright having Piotr so close to his head, certain that he wouldn't suddenly untie his mask even though he would be able to do it before Erik had a chance to stop him if he wanted to.

"No?"

"People stare at me a lot less now that I'm carrying you on my back. You're a very efficient attention attractor." Erik's spine, which had been tingling uncomfortably since he first picked Piotr up, was now finally calming down.

"So what?"

"Haven't you noticed people normally stare at me like I'm something that crawled out from under a rock?"

"No, I don't care."

"Of course, you don't", Erik rolled his eyes. "You are your mother's son."

"Does your back sting?" Piotr asked, not sure and not caring what Erik meant.

"No, it's alright now. You've been so calm I can barely tell I'm carrying you. You know, you're the most well-behaved little boy I've ever seen. I can't believe it sometimes."

"Really?" Piotr shifted a little higher so he could talk to him, obviously delighted to hear that.

"Yes, you're the best child in the history of children and you should know it. I was a nightmare when I was your age." and I was dying to hear someone call me a good kid, so there you go.

"Alina says I have to be very good with you. I shouldn't make you angry."

"She said that?" Erik's step faltered a little; he didn't like the sound of that. "That's not fair. Everyone makes me angry. I wouldn't hurt you if you did."

"She says you're different. Your head hurts when you're angry. That's why you touch it all the time."

"Um", Erik stuttered, getting slightly uncomfortable. "That's just a tic. I didn't know it was that obvious."

"Did she lie?"

"No, I suppose not. I just didn't want you to know that, but it's probably better that you do, considering that it worked."

"What worked?"

"Well, you don't make me angry. You're very good all the time."

"I don't want to hurt your head."

"As I said, very kind of you. That's why you get to come with me."

"What's your work? What are you doing today?" Piotr asked with interest.

"Well, I'm going to teach my soloist how to play the piano parts of my symphony. He's blind, so he can't read what I wrote, so I have to play it for him."

"But how does he know which keys to play? If he's blind?"

"What do you mean? He can still hear what he's doing. Oh", Erik suddenly understood. "Well, you know, once you play it for a while, you get used to it, and your fingers kind of know where the right key will be. They're all the same width, and they go in order from deeper to higher notes. So your hand learns where to go."

"Ohhhhh. Good." Piotr paused. "Can I listen?"

"Of course, you'll be with me the whole time. Just don't interrupt him."

"Can I play too?"

"If I find a way for you to do that without being noticed, I will let you play. But I can't promise it, because I don't know if there will be people still inside the building. Do you understand?"

"Sure."

Erik entered the Conservatory through one of the side entrances to avoid the girl at the reception, careful not to run into anyone. He stopped in a shadowy corner at the entrance and turned his head slightly to Piotr.

"Be very quiet", he whispered. "Oliver will be waiting for us in the room, and I'd like you to not say anything before we get there. I'll carry you so that nobody can hear your footsteps. Don't talk while we're in the hallways, alright?"

"Why are we hiding from him?"

"We're not. We're hiding from my boss, who is a lot scarier and less friendly than Oliver. I'll figure out a way to tell Oliver you're here with us when the

time is right." Erik realized now that there was no chance on Earth that Piotr might remember to be quiet for longer than five minutes, and was starting to get used to the fact Oliver will know about all this. It made him more than a little nervous; he had no idea how the man would react.

"Okay", Piotr whispered back.

"Don't worry. You won't have to be here long. Your mom will pick you up. I left her a note."

"Okay. But I like it here."

"Well, good to know", Erik smiled and continued swiftly through the hallways until he reached the room that held Oliver's favorite piano - he could hear Oliver rehearsing and warming up his fingers through the entire floor, and as soon as he entered the room (with Piotr still on his back), Oliver stopped. Erik managed to carefully close the door without dropping Piotr or bumping into anything and felt his blood pressure lower almost audibly now that they were out of the hallways.

"Good afternoon to my new maestro", Oliver turned to him and smiled, then cheerfully offered his hand which Erik carefully shook once. "I gotta admit, I'm looking forward to this. I feel like a student again."

"That's good. I'm glad", Erik said, feeling at the same time flattered and uncomfortable. He tried to think about what to do with Piotr at the same time -where to put him down to cause the least suspicion when Piotr solved that problem himself.

"He seems nice", Piotr nudged Erik, pulling the shoulder seam of his jacket. Piotr was, to his credit, getting incredibly good at figuring out where he could poke him to get his attention without causing him unnecessary alarm.

"Is that a child I hear?" Oliver gasped. "A little boy? In the Conservatory?"

"Uhh", Erik panicked and blanked. "No...?"

"Yes", Piotr said simultaneously. Erik sighed, putting him down; there was no point in trying to be unnoticeable anymore. Piotr hopped down politely, looking at the new person with his usual interest.

"And what is this fine gentleman's name?" Oliver grinned, tapping his cane against the side of his shoe and leaning forward slightly.

"I'm Piotr", Piotr said from below. "I'm here to play the piano. If Erik says I can", he smiled apologetically at Erik.

Oliver laughed in earnest. "I can't wait! I'm sure there's a thing or two you could teach me."

"I dunno, I just started", Piotr said, unsure if the man was teasing him or not. He was holding onto the leg of Erik's pants for reassurance, and Erik found it very, very hard to be annoyed with him anymore.

"You'll get your chance. But we have to work first, alright? Can you play with something else while you wait for us?" Erik's voice was serious as he crouched down so he could look Piotr in the eye. "This is important to me, do you understand?"

"Yes", Piotr nodded. "But then my turn, right?"

"Your turn then, yes." Erik bowed his head and smiled, taking a few pencils and pieces of paper from his pocket to give to him. Piotr could entertain himself quite easily; he usually had pockets full of interesting things he found around and didn't mind being left alone for a little bit, as long as he could get some attention when he wanted to.

"Sure", Piotr shrugged, then ran off. Erik's gaze followed him for a moment or two to check what he was doing, but the boy seemed to be simply exploring the room a little; he was too small to reach anything, but the sight of musical instruments and tools was still fascinating to him.

"What on Earth possessed you to bring a small child into the Conservatory?" Oliver whispered with concern as Erik turned back to him. "How did you get Heidel to approve of this?"

"Ah yes, Heidel. If he could not find out, that would be fantastic", Erik's voice shifted half an octave higher as he rubbed his temples, feeling a headache very near in the future. "Piotr won't bother us, he's the most well-behaved kid you've ever seen, I swear. He never bothers anybody."

Oliver looked shocked for a moment before letting out a short, sincere laugh. "Is he your son?"

"No", Erik replied miserably. "But he's still family. He's my neighbor's kid, but she got delayed at work and couldn't come- I couldn't leave him alone, so I had to bring him with me."

"Oh I see, I see", Oliver grinned. "Don't worry; I won't tell Heidel anything."

Erik spent another moment staring ahead in embarrassed silence, thankful that Oliver at least couldn't see him. He distracted himself by looking around the room for a chair, then pulling it up to sit next to Oliver, hoping silently that he would let it go. Unfortunately, this was still far too interesting for Oliver to let go.

"He's a cute kid. It's probably a lot of fun being around him, huh?" Oliver said after a minute of thinking.

"He's very smart", Erik stared at the golden cursive letters etched into the piano in front of him. "It's not hard to entertain him - he's so curious he'll learn anything you show him in a heartbeat. Yana, his mother, works a lot, so he's usually with Alina and me. I used to spend a lot more time with him because I was usually working from home. But I don't think that will be possible anymore."

"No, I think it probably won't be possible to bring him here every day", Oliver nodded, practically dying to know who Alina was and what the hell was happening there- this was the second time Erik mentioned her without giving any explanation. He made a mental note to ask at some point. "People would notice. But, since I'm the only one here now, and there are very few people in the Conservatory during summer anyway, if you happen to bring him once in a while I will simply not notice him at all and no one

will ever know. It's plausible deniability, considering I can't possibly see him, right?" he expected Erik to at least laugh a little at that joke, hoping to disperse his apparent embarrassment at least a little, but was again met with only silence. It was starting to irritate him slightly.

"I sure hope you're not gesturing something to me, buddy."

"No", Erik replied. "I was just thinking. That's very kind of you."

"Well, I never cared much about rules, and I don't want to be the reason you get estranged from your kid because you were busy giving me private lessons. Don't mention it."

"He's not my-"

"Not your son, I get it, but you kid anyway." Oliver cracked his knuckles. "Is this matter finally resolved? I'm itching to play some goddamn piano."

Erik played the first page to Oliver once, then once more in a slower tempo, occasionally stopping to clarify something that came to mind. Oliver seemed to have quite a good memory, and after a few tries managed to somehow play it all more or less note-for-note, with no glaring mistakes or slips - but something about it, hard to describe and pinpoint, kept gnawing at the back of Erik's head - wrong wrong wrong - and he couldn't quite explain how, but he knew that somehow some crucial part of the message was being lost. It sounded to him like when a person who didn't know a language would try to repeat a phrase after someone else - even if the sounds were all correct, it would linger somewhere in there that the person didn't understand what they were saying.

Erik thought in silence for a moment when Oliver finished. "Yes, that was close, but not quite right. Can you do it again?"

"Certainly, no problem." Oliver smiled and moved the hair out of his face, then obediently repeated the section once more. Erik wandered through the room while he played.

"Again."

"Sure." Oliver politely obliged, wondering why the hell Erik's voice sounded so flat all of a sudden.

"Again."

Oliver played it once again, deciding this would be the last time.

"Ag-"

"Is something bothering you, Erik?" Oliver asked at the keyboard, his right hand hovering a little above the keys as he lowered his left and tapped his fingers in a barely-audible rhythm on the soft cushion of the piano stool. It was the only, tiny little sign that gave away how frustrated he was getting.

"It all sounds different when you play it", Erik scratched at his chin behind Oliver, speaking with that same standoffish tone. "It's barely noticeable, but it's there. And always in a different way, every time. And they're not normal mistakes. You're not learning it wrong; you're changing it on purpose. I'm trying to figure out why."

"I'm used to interpreting things less than literally", Oliver shrugged.

"Are you doing this on purpose? Are you trying to say something to me?" Do you hate it? Do you hate me? Are you trying to make me angry? Please don't say yes. I have no idea how I'll react if you say yes.

"Not really", Oliver said. "God did not put me on this Earth to follow instructions, Maestro. I can do it if you want - but that's not why you wanted me here, is it?"

Erik thought about it for a moment. "No."

"What's the problem then?"

"If you're changing it while you're still learning, it might be unrecognizable by the end."

"That's what you're afraid of?" Oliver laughed. "That I'll just spiral out of your control into playing something that isn't even yours?"

Erik decided not to answer that.

"I admit I'm not the most obedient student, but I'm not that unhinged", Oliver remarked. "We've just started - I was trying it out; I guess I wasn't taking all of this that seriously yet, but apparently, you were. It's my mistake. I should have guessed it would be important to you."

Erik decided not to answer that, either.

"I'm not sure what to do when you go silent like that. I can't see what's going on, and you're so eerily quiet that it's like shouting into a void sometimes. Give me something, at least."

"Shouting into a void?" Erik repeated, frowning under his mask. That certainly stung.

"See, this is better, because at least now I know I've offended you. Can you imagine talking to someone you can't see who just withdraws completely when you try to have an honest conversation?"

"Oh, I absolutely can", bitterness dripped from Erik's voice.

"Then you can probably imagine what you're putting me through right now. Now, I've told you already - you can trust me I'll handle this composition with respect, now that I've realized how serious this is. I'll do my best to repeat after you verbatim while you're teaching me. How's that?"

"Fine", Erik said. "That's fine."

"Is there something, in particular, that's bothering you about what I've been doing?"

"No. Well, actually, yes", Erik finally said. "It's too loud. Too confident."

"Is it meant to be insecure?" Oliver raised his eyebrows in surprise. "You want me to play a quiet and shy allegro capriccioso?"

"Yes", Erik hissed quietly. "Yes, I'm sure it's hard for you to imagine, but this part, as happy as it is, is meant to be insecure. It's the happiness of

someone who is not used to being happy, and if you keep playing it so smoothly and loudly, it completely loses its point."

"Oh!" Oliver snapped his fingers. "Oh, of course! I was approaching this completely wrong. You should have said so sooner. Well, that casts a very different light on it all. Let me try again." he turned to the piano again.

"No, wait", Erik said, sitting down in his chair. "I'll show you again first. Please note the dynamics and the acciaccaturas."

"What was wrong with the acciaccaturas?"

"You're emphasizing and blending them too smoothly into the following note - they sound too smooth, almost like appoggiaturas. Make them quicker and less emphasized. It sounds like you're trying to embellish the main note, which is technically correct, but I'd like them to sound a little bit dissonant and out of tempo - like your hand slipped, if you can do that."

"But without sounding like my hand slipped, right?" Oliver laughed.

"If possible."

"Well, I do love challenges."

"Is that good enough for this particular page, Maestro?" Oliver asked, only half-joking, about half an hour after they'd started.

"Yes", Erik leaned back in his chair to Oliver's left. "Well, maybe we should take a break now. Piotr?" he turned around to check where he was for what seemed the hundredth time.

"Yeah?" Piotr looked up from where he was sitting on the floor, reading one of his picture books - well, mostly looking at the pictures.

"Are you bored?"

"Nah." he shook his head. "I like the music."

"Good", Erik nodded. He picked the parts Piotr would like on purpose - he didn't want the boy stuck in a foreign room listening to something melancholic or disturbing. "Would you like to"

"Who plays it better?" Oliver interrupted, smiling. "Erik or me?"

"Erik."

"You're kidding? You can tell the difference?"

"No", Piotr shrugged to himself. "It's the same song. But he plays best."

"Young man, I am properly offended by that", Oliver turned his head. "Although, admittedly, impressed by your loyalty. I didn't think kids your age could lie."

"Would you like to try playing while Oliver rests, Piotr?" Erik asked quietly, smiling to himself. He was well aware that Oliver was, strictly speaking, a more skilled and more experienced pianist than he was - but every time Piotr announced to someone that Erik was the best in whatever context, he felt his chest expand a little.

"Can I?" Piotr got up with alarming speed and pitter-pattered towards them.

"Yes, it's alright. Your mom will probably be here soon to pick you up, but you can have a little fun before she comes. I don't think anyone will notice at this time."

"You can sit here", Oliver shifted to his right to make room for Piotr on the stool next to him, and Erik lifted him to help him sit - but, instead of trying to play, he looked over at Oliver.

"You're nice. Erik says you're like the main character in his story."

Oliver graced that comment with a very loud, roaring laughter but as Erik felt his cheeks and ears getting hot with embarrassment, Oliver didn't make any snide or poking remarks. He chuckled one more time to himself and said to Piotr, "Well, to be honest, I'm always the main character when I'm on the stage."

"He has eyes like my mom", Piotr turned to Erik, who immediately winced at that comment.

"Piotr", he said with quiet seriousness, "It's very rude to comment on people's looks with someone else like they're not here. Alright?"

Piotr blinked at that remark - he was not used to Erik being strict with him; he only had two important rules - don't yell too loud, don't try to touch the mask. His mother was much more firm so it didn't bother him - but Erik, who normally walked on eggshells around him, was right now acting out of character. Piotr nodded but didn't say anything, getting slightly upset.

"It's fine, boy, I'm not offended", Oliver said with interest. "Your uncle is raising you well, but don't worry. Is your mommy also blind?"

"No", Piotr shook his head, confused. "She just has blue eyes, like you."

"Blue eyes? I don't have blue eyes", Oliver touched the skin of his eyelids as if he could feel the color underneath. "Wait, do I have blue eyes?"

Piotr, who was just told not to comment on people's looks and smart enough to remember that, just turned to Erik for an answer.

"Um, k-kind of", Erik stuttered. "Maybe more grey."

Oliver paused for a moment. "I didn't know that. The last time I saw myself properly, they were brown. Well, thank you, young man", he nodded at Piotr. "People are usually too scared to comment on anything about me - I would never have known. They must have turned blue sometime after I went blind, and nobody told me. Hah."

"So can you show me how to play like you?" Piotr replied.

"Like me?" Oliver laughed in surprise. "Not like Erik? I'm joking, I'm joking. It's easy to play like me, but I can't show you how. The only way you can play like me is if you disregard everything other people try to teach you. How about that?"

"That thing", Piotr disregarded everything Oliver said with obvious natural talent, "Uh, when you drag your hand over the piano?"

"Glissando? Hah, yeah, I can show you that. It fascinated me, too, when I was a kid. Right or left hand? Which one is easier for you?"

"He's right-handed", Erik chimed in quietly, listening to the conversation.

"Okay, so young man, if you want to gliss from high notes to low, then you put your thumb on the piano like this", he demonstrated, "and just-" he glided his hand across the keyboard smoothly elegantly. "If you want to go the other way, use your fingers. The middle finger, to be precise. Like this."

Piotr gave it a valiant attempt, even though his hand was too small for it.

"It hurts."

"I suppose you're probably using your knuckles? You should glide with your nail, not your finger, then it won't hurt. You'll learn it, don't worry."

Piotr tried it a few more times, with no particular success.

"Hmm." he frowned at the keyboard with obvious disappointment.

"Don't worry - nobody learns it right away. You must have fun. You'll have plenty of time to worry about right and wrong techniques when you're older. For now, just make a lot of noise."

"Okay." Piotr hopped off the stool. "I wanna go play something else now." he walked up to Erik, pulling his jacket again. "Are we gonna stay here long?"

"A little longer, but not much. We have to go through this part just one more time - your mom should be here very soon. You've been very polite, and if you just hold out for a little longer, I will be very thankful."

"Ah, okay", Piotr sighed. "I'll wait."

"Thank you, little prince."

Erik's note had been thankfully simple and precise: the address, the room, and the entrance where Yana could enter without being seen. She wasn't eager to explain to people what she was doing in the Conservatory - a shy little woman dressed in her work clothes with an obvious Russian accent would have stood out if there were people present to see her, and she was getting slightly self-conscious. She walked through the Conservatory noting the paintings and photographs of famous musicians, the neat hallways, and classy wallpaper, counting the doors until she reached the one Erik had written to knock on. She knocked on it, then heard rustling from the inside as Erik rushed to open the door.

"You're here", he sighed with obvious relief. "Come in."

"Mama!" Piotr hopped off the chair he was sitting on next to the piano and ran up to hug her; she lifted him and looked around the room. The other man sitting at the piano turned and got up as well, greeting her with a sincere smile and handshake.

"Nice to meet you, madam. Your son is quite a pleasure to be around."

"He didn't bother you?" Yana looked at Piotr. "I didn't think Erik would bring him here."

"No, not at all. I won't mind if you bring him again."

"He says you were very good", she said to Piotr in Russian. "I'm very proud of you."

"I was. And I learned a piano trick."

"Very good. You'll show it to me. Now, we have to go. Erik", she turned to him, "can I just talk to you a little before we go?

"Uh, of course", Erik followed her out.

"Erik", Yana said gently as they exited the room. "Why did you take him with you?"

"Huh?" Erik blinked, trying to shift his focus from music to her. "Sorry. I had to go, and I couldn't just leave him alone. But he was safe, nothing could happen to him."

"You could leave him with me. At work."

"We leave him with you too often these days. I've been too busy to be with him often", he fumbled. "What if you get fired if your boss gets tired of seeing him around? I couldn't risk it."

"Erik", she repeated, calling his name like a little bird. "That was not a normal thing you did."

Erik turned his head to look at her, his expression is unreadable.

"Do you see these pictures of men on the walls?" Yana gestured at the walls.

"I… yes. They're musicians." Erik said, unsure where that was going - he didn't like the direction, but he was taken aback and unable to react properly.

"Do you think men who want a career in Manhattan often take someone else's son with them to work?" Yana said quietly. "I don't know a lot about normal, but even I know that. If anyone saw you, other than that good pianist, they would think it's very strange. Men don't just babysit children that aren't theirs and take them to work."

"I suppose a normal man would know better", he hissed, adjusting his collar higher. "I won't make that mistake next time." He turned away to get Piotr and get this over with; if he could still focus on work after all this.

"Erik, look at me", she stopped, pulling his sleeve lightly.

He stopped, even though he was furious enough that he would have kept going and ignored her if it was anyone else. Yana looked back at him, her eyes were slightly glassy.

"The best thing about you", she said slowly, "is that you don't think you're better than anyone. You could move and never see us again, or decide that

Piotr is someone else's problem if you want. You have money now, you will soon have a career. All those men in pictures who have those things would not take a little boy to work and risk getting distracted, or people laughing at them, even if it was their son."

"You're my friend", he said without thinking. "To hell with them all. You were my friend back when I wanted to die, I'm not going to forget that as soon as my life gets better-"

"Mikita would kill to give Piotr a chance to see a music school and try playing piano", she continued. "If he was alive now, he would be so happy."

Erik didn't quite know what to say.

"It was the strangest thing to do, to bring him here. But it was the most beautiful thing you could do. It's the most beautiful thing, that you don't think you're better than anyone. Even now that you could have reasons to think that. You had nothing a year ago, and now you could build yourself a castle and say you're above everyone, but you don't. I know you want to, and I wouldn't judge you - you'd be safer like that. But you're here. With us. You are such a good, beautiful friend. Do you understand?"

Erik still didn't know what to say, but he knew if he didn't cover his mouth with his hand Yana might see his lip trembling slightly, so he did just that.

"You need to get married", she smiled at him. "You're the only man Alina deserves. And you'll be a good father."

"Goddamnit, Yana, stop", he whispered through his hand. "Jesus Christ. Show some mercy."

"No", she poked his shoulder with her finger. "I like torturing you with nice words."

"Does it make you happy to see me squirm?"

"Yes! Very much." she smiled. "It also makes you less conceited."

Erik lowered the hand from his mouth, regaining his composure, and stuffed both his hands in his pockets. "Did you learn that word just to mess with me?"

"No, actually", Yana's voice had that unmistakable note of mischief. "I learned it to mess with Amelija, but it's more useful than I thought. Anyway, we won't be keeping you any longer. Piotr needs to eat dinner. Please thank that man for being so patient."

"Oliver? Yes, alright. I will." Erik opened the door and went back inside, waiting until Piotr gathered his things and left with Yana. Oliver listened to the whole conversation politely and patiently and waved at Piotr as he left. Erik didn't quite know what to say in the newfound awkwardness and silence that ensued, but thankfully Oliver broke it first.

"Well, all of this has been more than a little unusual."

"I'm sorry. Yana said to thank you for your patience. I didn't know what to do - you have my full attention now."

"No, that wasn't my point", Oliver shook his head. "I did have a lot of fun. I like kids, they're funny. I just didn't expect you to like them. I had thought you to be a much colder man when I first met you than I do today. I'm sorry - it was a mistake on my part. I must say, I think we'll get along a lot better than I'd originally imagined."

"Uh", Erik panicked. "Alright - thank you."

"As long as you stop bleeding me dry, maestro. Your attention to detail is admirable, but maybe you could extend some of this patience and understanding to me as well? You do want me to keep doing this every day, yes?"

"Yes…?"

"Well, so do I. But I know my limits, and they might not be to your liking in the beginning, so we'll both have to adjust our expectations a little bit. I'm sure it won't be so offensive to your ears by the end."

Erik paused for a second, processing that, and it suddenly hit him - like a big, heavy, embarrassing brick to the stomach - how he'd been acting and how it would seem to someone who didn't know him. "It's not offensive to my ears at all." he paused. Words were hard to form in his mouth, even if his head knew what he wanted to say. "No, your performance is incredible, I'm just used to working until I pass out. You're a much better pianist than I am a teacher - that is, perhaps, the whole problem."

"Not a problem at all, just a challenge", Oliver smiled. "I think we'll have a lot more fun here than I imagined."

Chapter 38: The Violinist

"How are things going with Oliver?" Alina asked while Erik was getting ready to go to work, as he was getting accustomed to doing every afternoon lately.

"On his part, fantastic. He's an incredible musician, and quick to learn." he buttoned up the little amber cufflinks, looking for his jacket. Even in the summer, Erik still wore an extra layer or two compared to everyone else, for various practical reasons.
"On his part? What do you mean?" she sat up straighter. "And on your part?"
"I think I might be bad for his nerves", Erik admitted slowly, studying his jacket for invisible dust specs. "That is, I think I annoy him fairly often."
"Well, I've never worked with anyone who didn't annoy me at least sometimes", Alina pointed out. "What do you think annoys him?"
"I don't know how to tell him what I want him to do, and if he wasn't so good at figuring it out, I don't know how this would work. I can't tell when he's had enough, so he has to tell me every time he's tired, and I just - well, you've seen how I get, I have a hard time stopping. It's a miracle he's able to tell me these things openly because not many people would be. I simply don't think I'm very enjoyable to work with."
He had expected to hear some reassurance - darling, I'm sure you're not that bad, it's all going to be alright - but to his surprise, Alina just shrugged.
"So?"
"What do you mean?"
"Well, you just started. I was also bad when I just started - I have now been a teacher for eight years, and some days I'm still bad at it. As long as you two can communicate, you can learn how to work together. It's not the end of the world."
"I suppose. I just think I'm driving him insane."
"Does he act as if he hates you?"

"Not from what I can tell. He's sometimes frustrated, but he also laughs a lot, that's just how he is. He is very- friendly, I suppose? At least that's how he acts, I think it's more his personality than actually wanting to be my friend." Erik was as usual quite good at noticing and cataloging Oliver's behaviors, but unsure how to interpret them. "What do you think?"
"I would think otherwise - there's a big difference
between polite and friendly. He could still be polite to you if he hated you, but it would be very hard for him to be friendly, especially day after day. I think he probably doesn't hate you. He probably actually likes you and is trying to make you open up more."
"I don't know what to think about that."
"It's alright. One day you'll see I'm right, as usual." she smiled.
"I hope so, because I have one more musician to find, and he might not be as understanding as Oliver if we have to work together. I still don't have my solo violin - I told Heidel I'd handle the soloists, but I only have one so far, and Heidel picked him."
"Have you found any candidates?"
"Not exactly. There's one person I have in mind, but I only know his name."
"Ah, Jonsson", Heidel sighed. "Yes. I know him. I wish you hadn't said that."
"Why?" Erik pressed. "What's wrong with him?"
"Daniel Jonsson has been the music elite's biggest hope and saddest disappointment in the past few years", Heidel took off his reading glasses to rub his eyes. "His parents are both in the New York Philharmonic Orchestra - his mother is a clarinetist, the father plays bassoon. He got into the old Academy when he was only sixteen, and that was quite a feat, they are not as forgiving as the Conservatory. He seemed to be an incredible prodigy, finished music school with excellent grades, all of that. For the first two years, we all thought he'd be the next Paganini. Then he started deteriorating - stopped showing up, grades went down, stopped practicing anything past the bare minimum. He was terrible to have in any orchestral project - other musicians liked him, but he was impossible for conductors to manage. I think he started drinking- how he got alcohol so young, I'm not sure - and when he finally graduated, he barely passed and we were all eager to let him go", Heidel sighed. "I can't say what happened to him. Anderson is in charge of the violin department in the old Academy, and he's a good friend of the Jonssons. He tried to keep the boy on the right path, but

he could never quite reach out to him. He hasn't been speaking to us since he graduated. It's been what - less than two years, maybe? He can't be older than twenty-one now. Though you'd never be able to tell - the last time I saw him, he still looked like the same anemic teenager he was when he arrived here."
"Alright", Erik blinked, trying to process all of that. "Well, I heard him play in February, and he left an impression on me." a sort-of mixed impression, but Heidel didn't need to know that - he was not lacking ammunition against the poor fellow.
"Did he?" Heidel said. "Well, I could write to his parents about his new address. I heard from Anderson he moved out and now lives alone somewhere in Brooklyn. If you want him so badly - we could write him a letter and ask him to come if he's interested. But I wouldn't count too much on it - I don't think he's played anything that required actual effort since he graduated. Maybe even before that."
"I know, I know. It doesn't matter. I'd like to at least try talking to him."
To Mr. Daniel Jonsson,
I'm assembling a small orchestra to play a new symphony this Autumn. If you're not too busy, I'd like to hire you as a soloist. We can negotiate any details - please send your reply to the address below.
Erik Giry
To Mr. Daniel Jonsson,
You may not have gotten my previous letter, so I'm writing again. I'm assembling a small orchestra to play a symphony this Autumn and we'd be honored to have you as the solo violin. I've heard you play before and was impressed, which is why I'm inviting you specifically. Your salary can be negotiated but will be in the range of high-end salaries for productions of this size. Please contact me or Mr. Heidel if you're interested.
Kind regards,
Erik Giry.
To Mr. Jonsson,
I'm sorry to bother you again if you've received my previous letters. Please contact me if you'd like to participate in a production of a symphony as a soloist. My address is written below.
Erik Giry
"Why is it so important that it be this particular violinist?" Alina asked carefully, interrupting Jack who was giving his damnedest to make things

worse.
"Because he's good", Erik crossed his arms in annoyance.
"See, I have to call bull-" Jack started, but after catching a glance from Alina, threw his hands in the air and turned around in exasperation. Sure, if she was alright with enabling this childish tantrum, she was welcome to handle it herself. Erik looked after him furiously; he had a few things to reply to that but wasn't eager to start the fight.
"He is", Alina nodded. "What does he do best?"
Erik's annoyed look shifted quickly to her. "Play violin."
"Clever", she bared her teeth. "There are many incredible musicians in this city, and if you want this particular one, I'd like to know what it is about him you find so irreplaceable. You know, since we're about to make that effort to track him down and talk or bribe him into performing again. All for you. Because we care about your dream coming true."
"Nobody asked you to - " Erik started, then stopped himself. He brought his fingers up to his temples and rubbed them lightly, sighing heavily. After a moment's pause, he started again. "It's hard to explain. I've heard him play. He's an atrociously lazy little brat but also simply one of the best violinists I've ever heard; and…"
"And?"
"And, listen, it's stupid, alright?" he looked at her angrily again. "But when I heard him, I had a feeling he'd understand. He'll know what the symphony is about, and he'll do it right. It's hard to explain. It's just a hunch. Don't tell Jack about it."
"Hmm", Alina frowned slightly. "I think I understand. I think you should try, at least."
"Try what?"
"To talk to him and persuade him. If he understands the symphony, he'll understand you", she nodded at him.
"I don't want to talk to him."
"But why?"
Erik sighed. For that precise reason. It's better if he just gets the music and not the sad apparition behind it. It might even sound better. "Jack is better at persuasion."
"And yet you won't tell Jack why you want Jonsson, and refuse to talk to Jonsson, so all of this will be communicated how exactly?" Alina was growing slightly frustrated with all of this.

"I don't know."
"Darling, I am willing to follow you to the ends of the Earth", she rambled with obvious annoyance now, "but not if I have to drag you all the way there. You have to make some sort of compromise to find a solution here."
Erik sighed. It was hard to argue with that; she was doing her best.
"Alright."
"I don't think Jack would mind doing it if you told him why it's important", she offered.
"I can't explain why it's important. He's right, it is my whim", he shrugged.
Alina looked at him for a moment, then at Jack who was rolling a cigarette a few steps further and considering just going home, then at Erik again.
"Jack", she turned around and called after him. "Can you come back for a moment?"
Jack, impressively successful in not rolling his eyes, walked slowly back to them as he lit his cigarette.
"Erik wants Jonsson because he thinks Jonsson would understand his music and play it well", she said. "It's his first composition ever being played for an audience, and he'd like to see it done with love. He'd like you to try to persuade him, but if he refuses, we'll think of something else."
Jack narrowed his eyes at Erik. "You couldn't have said that yourself?"
"You're the one being difficult now", Alina interrupted.
"Right, fair maiden, I apologize." Jack's glare was still drilling holes in Erik's skull. "And do you have any idea what you want me to say, or do you simply expect me to handle it as I normally do? Does it even occur to you that I can simply fail at something and not just purposely be holding you down?"
Erik blinked. "Oh. Uh… you've never failed before."
"Why you… agh", Jack threw his hands up. "No, I wasn't trying to oppose you. I don't understand that asshole any better than I understand you. I have no idea why he won't do it."
"He doesn't want to", Erik started, realizing how dumb that sounded. He tried to explain it in a way he would explain it to Alina - but it doesn't matter if Jack thinks it's stupid, since it isn't about me anyway, he thought.
"He stopped playing for himself long ago. It's just a job for him now. If he starts feeling it again, god knows what else he might start feeling", he shrugged. It did still sound stupid.
"But you said he plays with his friends", Jack said.

"Yes, that's different. He plays with his friends because they're as good as him, but he plays like an asshole. He still has standards, even if he hates himself", Erik explained.
"Huh", Jack bit his lip, smiling slightly. "I never realized you thought about other people at all."
"He's not hard for me to understand", Erik bowed his head at him.
"Mhm", Jack smiled slightly wider. "So, you're proposing we simply offer him more money?"
"That might work if he needs it", Erik said. "But it's not… I might have another idea."
"Oh? I'll gladly hear all of your ideas."
"He remembers what it felt like before", Erik started rambling again nervously. "He just has to be reminded. I don't think he could resist playing something that would make him that involved again, even if he's afraid of it, it would just be too much to resist. I think we just have to somehow show him what we had in mind, and he'd accept if the symphony is what I think it will be."
Alina blinked. It was suddenly much clearer why Erik refused to simply knock on Jonsson's door, meet him and show him the sheet music; obvious reasons aside, the implication was that if Jonsson refused that might mean the symphony itself wasn't what Erik wanted it to be.
"Sorry", she chimed in. "But if he has avoided it for so long, why would he be any different now? I'm certain there's plenty of incredible music he could have been playing but he refused to."
"I don't know", Erik admitted. "Maybe he was disappointed."
"By what?"
"I don't know. It just sounds like he stopped hoping for something long ago."
"Ah."
"Maybe we really should offer him more money instead", Erik shrugged, feeling somewhat insecure.
"Hey, that I can do" Jack shrugged. "But I think you're onto something here."
"You do?"
"Yes, but the more you say it, the more I think you should be the one to talk to him", Jack bit his finger in thought. "Who's to say why he ignores Heidel's letters? Maybe he has a personal problem with Heidel or the

Conservatory, or maybe the old Academy? Maybe he doesn't need money, maybe he doesn't open his mail on time. But if he's avoiding Heidel, then the best way to approach him is without a middle-man. Just go to him, alone, and talk to him. You'll say what you want to say much better than I can."
"Do you know how Mozart came to write his last work? The Requiem?" Erik asked quietly as he walked through Brooklyn a few days later, the familiar pit in his stomach present as usual. He wondered if it would ever go away - or if maybe he should simply get used to it; if he wished to get what he wanted most in life, perhaps he should get used to continuously facing his worst fears.
But if it works, if this - if I succeed, would it not be worth it?
"Tell me", Alina smiled.
"He was approached by a masked man with a bag of money and asked to write a requiem. He was very sick and died while writing it - so he more or less wrote the Requiem for himself. But I've always liked the implication that musicians, even famous ones, can be approached if you just bring a challenging idea, a mask, and a bag of money", he smiled. "Maybe coaxed into making something great. We'll see. This is Jonsson's building", he pointed.
"Not what I'd expect from a rich musical prodigy", Alina frowned. "Isn't it a bit…"
"Ugly? Old? Depressing?" Erik looked up. "Very lax in its approach to fire safety?"
"I was going to say plain, but you probably know what you're talking about."
"Well, in any case", Erik shrugged as the pit in his stomach started expanding, swallowing his lower ribs and making it harder to breathe. "In any case, I should go inside and knock. You're sure you're alright waiting out here on the sidewalk alone?"
"Yes."
He adjusted his mask, his collar, and his gloves.
"Erik, he's probably just a stupid adolescent", Alina gently remarked. "He doesn't know anything. Don't be so hard on yourself."
"Right. I'll see you in a bit." he turned and walked into the ugly, plain, depressing building.
Erik looked around through the building, as he often did when he was in a

new place. It was an unremarkable building full of seemingly tiny apartments, slightly depressing with paint cracking here and there and cobwebs in the corners of the hallways. But at least it was quiet - still, Erik couldn't help but wonder what it was like for some young man to live in this boring, grey, dead place all on his own.
"Yes?" a young man - barely past his teenage years - opened the door, then backed away a little when he saw Erik. He had a delicate, bony face with mousy brown hair that hung around his ears and temples and grey eyes behind long eyelashes that blinked at Erik in confusion. He could have been the main character in some Russian novel about poets fighting to the death over a fickle lover. Erik remembered how he wanted to strangle him when he first heard him play with lazy indifference, and suddenly felt the need to strangle him again when he saw how undeservedly goddamn pretty he was. You just had to be born with the silver spoon in your mouth, you little-
"Are you Mr. Daniel Jonsson?" he asked politely instead. The young man looked painfully aware of the fact Erik was much taller and practically towering over him, but Erik had no idea how to change that.
"Why? Who's asking?" the young man narrowed his eyes. Oh, that was a look Erik saw on people's faces fairly often, and he also didn't know how to change that. Still, he couldn't let it get the better of him before he fulfilled his reason for being here.
"My name is Erik Giry", he spoke calmly and carefully, weighing every word. "I sent some letters to you through Fritz Heidel, but I haven't received any response, so I thought you might not have gotten them."
"I- letters?" the young man blinked, then frowned. He kept his hand on the door, his expression darkening. "Yes, I got Heidel's letters. I didn't reply because I had nothing to say."
"Um", Erik stuttered. "D-did you read them? We're assembling -"
"Yes, I read them", Daniel straightened despite his uneasiness. "I'm not interested. You can tell Heidel that, too."
"They're not from him, they were from me", Erik started rambling. "I- I'm writing a symphony and I need some soloists, and I heard you play last winter in Lower Manhattan and I thought, you're incredibly talented, obviously, and you sounded very bored playing there - but I digress. I need someone who can play that part because it's quite difficult -
someone really good who will give his best and won't just learn to play it like a puppet - and I thought you might be perfect for it."

"Thank you", Daniel replied with icy coldness. "But I'm not interested. Not in ambitious projects, not in beautiful unseen symphonies, not in giving my best."
"But if you just- just-"
"There are plenty of talented violin players in New York City, sir", Daniel said, backing away a little. "I'm sure you can find someone just as good, if not better."
"But see, that's the point", Erik leaned his hand on the doorframe to steady himself, which Daniel noticed and interpreted differently because he backed away a tiny bit more. "See, if you just let me show you some of it, the sheet music, then you could see if you like it - and I really thought you might be interested, so if you just give me a second"
"No!" Daniel nearly yelled, obviously frightened. "I don't want to! I don't know what Heidel told you about me, but I'm not free for hire! Kindly fuck off and leave me alone!" he slammed the door and locked it loudly, leaving Erik standing frozen in the hallway.
"But-", Erik managed as the door slammed in his face. For a moment he just stood there looking at the plain brown wood, shocked beyond words, his mind blank.
Hot, searing shame from the rejection coursed through his body like lightning, splitting him in half.
One half wanted to throw his body against the door until it broke down and shake Jonsson until he had no choice but to understand that some little brat had no place talking to Erik like that, that he'd better show some respect if he wanted to keep his stupid little head in one piece.
The other half howled, locked out, locked out, locked out so loudly in his head that he could barely think from its thunderous echo, and even if he wanted to bang on the door or yell for Jonsson to open it, he couldn't. He wanted to cry his lungs out, to apologize even if he had no idea what he did wrong; to beg this juvenile, self-absorbed, ungrateful boy to consider that even though the man at his door was so monstrous in his otherness, perhaps if he just agreed to listen he'd understand what he was talking about.
For a minute or two, he stood there completely paralyzed.
"-but I just thought we had something in common." he heard himself whispering to the closed door. He turned on his heel and walked out of the building as if in some sort of trance. His shoulder slammed against the doorframe at the main entrance of the building as he left without even

realizing it.
Alina waited for him outside, sitting patiently on the edge of a nearby bench. She stood up as she saw him arrive, and he realized she must have noticed something strange about him because her brow furrowed deeply with obvious concern.
"What happened? What did he say?" she asked quietly.
Erik shook his head.
"Should we go?" she tried again, taking his hand. He didn't protest but didn't respond either.
He said nothing.
"Hm", Alina looked to the side, trying to think of something to say.
Erik started walking slowly and stiffly towards the street, still holding Alina's hand. She followed without question, and they walked the entire way home in total silence. The only sign of any internal life from him was an occasional twitch of the hand she was holding.
He unlocked the front door mechanically,
went inside,
turned around,
sat down,
then stood back up before Alina could properly enter and headed back out.
"Hey, wait", she called after him. "Where to?"
He stopped but didn't turn back to face her. "I don't know. I'm taking a walk."
"Can I come?" please, stop running away.
Pause. "As you wish."
Alina blinked. Well, that wasn't a no, and if he didn't want her there he would have said so. She followed quickly after him, barely catching up with his long strides; that horrible numbness in his step was subsiding and something else was taking its place. Alina silently braced herself for whatever was about to come.
Erik walked through the island to the shore, then across the beaches and caves, with some alarming intensity building up in his movements. He entered one of the caves on the very edge of the island, climbing over sharp rocks without paying any attention to his hands and clothes getting ripped against the rough stone. Alina watched from the bottom entrance, unable to follow in her dress and shoes, and entered the cave through the longer, but more forgiving, stone path.

Erik barely stopped to wait for her as he entered a tunnel and she had to quicken her pace to catch up to him; he practically ran through it, Alina following, for a minute or two until they reached a large room of sorts illuminated here-and-there by holes in the cave roof, but otherwise almost completely black. Erik looked like he wanted to go on, but stopped himself at the center of the room, opening and closing his fists. Alina could do nothing but stare at his back from behind and wonder why he was breathing so heavily.

He let out the loudest, most blood-curdling scream Alina had ever heard, and she automatically shut her eyes and covered her ears; a painful and thunderous mixture between a war cry and the shriek of someone being burned alive. He only stopped when he ran out of breath, then took in a deep one, pulling at the hair on his scalp to compose himself, as a single violent shudder went through his body.

He then turned around and told Alina quietly, "He refused."

"I'm sorry", she said with tears in her eyes, realizing her hands were still covering her ears. She put them down quickly. "Wh-why? What did he say?"

"He wants nothing to do with me", Erik started rambling, his voice going into a crescendo as he started pacing around the cave room, "he didn't let me inside, didn't let me show him the symphony, he received our letters but didn't want anything to do with Heidel- he was so scared like I was going to b-b-bite his throat off, he told me to fuck off and slammed the door in my face!" he was yelling by the time he finished, clenching and unclenching his fists and pacing like a caged tiger. "I did nothing to him! I was respectful and polite and kind to that stupid little brat, I wrote him letters, offered him a decent salary, I told him I wanted him specifically for his skill and talent - he wants nothing to do with the Conservatory and nothing to do with me, because he looked at me and concluded I was some madman, some m-m-monster who'd t-tor-torment and abuse him, and he has no intention of letting that happen to him!" Erik's voice was less shouting and more pleading now as his hands covered his masked face. "I-I-I'm not! I wouldn't harm him! I know how that sounds, I know I've done it before, but he has no way of knowing that! I'm sorry! I wouldn't do that again! I swear! Why does he think that- is it that obvious- even through the mask, even when I try- "

"No", Alina said calmly but firmly. "No, you're not like that at all. I know

you."
"But he- oh God, that terror in his eyes, what did I do to him? Wh-what-"
"Stop", Alina interrupted. "You heard what Heidel said. He broke under pressure once when he was young, and doesn't want that to happen to him again. He's afraid of Heidel, the Academy, and people with great expectations screaming at him that he's not good enough. It's not about you. He doesn't know you at all. He just wants to live a quiet life and not think about things that hurt him."
"But I just wanted- wanted to offer him something more, to use that ridiculously talented head of his!" Erik rubbed his temples in a desperate attempt to stay present. "It's such a rare, precious gift and he's letting it all go to waste! Spoiled, ungrateful, entitled little- "
"It's still his head you're talking about, and his hands", Alina remarked. "He has the choice to let it go to waste if he so pleases - if it makes him happier. You just have to accept that. You can't change what he wants."
Erik looked at her as if she put a knife through his heart with that last sentence. "I can't, can I?"
"No", she replied gently. "But that's not your fault. Nobody can, that's the point. You can sometimes make people do what you want, but you can't make it come from them."
"I-" he slid down the stone wall of the cave and buried his face in his hands.
"Think about it", she sat down next to him. "Imagine having a great talent - I'm sure you can, hah - but instead of being left to explore and discover on your own, the world around you confines you to a very narrow idea of what you can do with that talent to make it right. And you have to listen, have to be grateful for the great gift you have, but your life is no longer your own."
"I would not have taken his life from him", Erik whispered. "It's just one symphony. I- I mean, I know how demanding I am, but I'm not delusional - it's still just one symphony. And I've already given so much freedom to Oliver - rewritten some parts so that students can play them - why would I go and demand from him, specifically, to sacrifice everything he has for one obscure performance?" because you would, because you did, and because he's smart enough to notice it- he knows, he knows, he knows, little bright prodigy, little shining star, you picked him precisely because he's smart enough to see through you and smart enough to stop you in time. If only she had been, too.
"I believe you", Alina said earnestly. "But, as I said, he doesn't know you

and doesn't know any of this. He didn't refuse because it was you, it's the other way around. He refused because he doesn't know you, has no reason to trust you and doesn't want to go back to how he was before. That's all."
Erik's breathing started returning to normal, but then - "He's terrified of me." Yes, well, seeing through you has always been a traumatizing experience.
"Oh, I believe that", Alina shrugged. "He's probably terrified of Heidel, too, and his other former professors, and whoever tries to assert themselves as his boss or mentor. He lives in that apartment all alone, plays music that bores him, and drinks at night pretending he's better than everyone. How would he possibly react to this all of a sudden? You must understand", she took his hand, "that people sometimes do that. You have to accept that it has nothing to do with you and that you can't base your happiness on how people react to you." Alina was starting to realize this conversation had become suspiciously circular while she wasn't paying attention, but had no idea how to stop it now.
"It's because it's me", he repeated. "I swear. I saw how he looked at me. It's me, I scared him."
"Hm", Alina leaned her head very lightly on Erik's shoulder. "Perhaps. That would be very stupid of him, but it's possible. He'll regret it once he realizes what an opportunity he missed."
Erik's breathing apparently couldn't decide if it was returning to normal or not, but his thought process was, decidedly, absolutely not. "This- this is what will keep happening, you know? This is what always happens, and I- I can get used to it, but you- you shouldn't have to endure it because of me, y-you don't - they'll start treating you like that too, that same disgust and fear and contempt in their eyes because you're with me, and I can't stand that- you shouldn't- I shouldn't let that happen, if I have any decency and dignity left- oh god." he closed his mouth, swallowed and leaned his head back on the cave wall. The torrent of thoughts in his head was getting too fast and impossible for him to follow, molding into a singular scream - I'm hurting, it's dark here and I'm alone, and I'm hurting, and it will never stop.
Alina kept silent. She had no intention to argue with the torrent; she simply sat there as her fingers drew little circles on his shoulder.
"I have to stop", he started again. "This drama is helping nobody. It's just adding onto the load of things you have to endure because of me, and I know you hate it when I yell and I know I should stop - this is pathetic -

he's just some kid - but I - really am trying to stop, please understand, it's just not happening for some reason - "
"You don't have to stop", Alina said quietly. "You'll stop when it stops." one little circle, two, three. You think you've gotten somewhere, but then you're back at the beginning.
"But I really should be able to control myself-"
"I know. I know. But you can hate yourself later. Right now, you should just sit with me for a little bit. I don't care how long we sit or how much you talk. Or how loud you shout."
"I'm scaring you-"
"No, no. You surprised me, I'll admit. But it's alright. I'm fine. I'm still here."
Erik swallowed. "I'd never hurt you, I'm sorry -"
"Who said anything about you hurting me? You haven't even considered it. You're just scared of letting me see you like this", she finally turned to him. "But I, for one, am glad you've decided to share this with me, instead of just disappearing like you used to. I am so, so very glad. Thank you."
He couldn't argue with that. Well, he actually could, but his mind was so tired from all the screaming - and since she was so clearly offering him a lifeboat, stubbornly deciding to keep drowning would be quite selfish. And stupid. Erik closed his eyes, leaned his head back again, and tried once again to calm down. It's dark in here, and I'm hurting, but I'm not alone.
Is it possible that it might stop? One day?
"I'd like to be forgiven", he finally said.
"You will be", Alina whispered gently. "This is how it feels while it's happening."
Later that night as Alina was getting ready to sleep Erik lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling with an empty look in his eyes, still in his clothes and mask. The curtains were drawn, but the window was slightly ajar - there was nobody on the street to see or hear them, so Alina insisted to keep it a little open until they fell asleep; Erik had to admit the fresh air was soothing after the whole day.
"Alina?" he called for her quietly. Alina was currently letting down and brushing her hair - but as she heard him she turned around immediately.
"Yes?"
He wanted to ask her - does it not bother you? Does it not disgust you? Do you really - but the words wouldn't come out. All he managed to do was

mess up his breathing again as he stubbornly stared at the ceiling.
Alina took the rest of the pins out of her hair and decided brushing would have to be done in the morning, as she slowly got up and walked over to the bed, closing the window and carefully lying down next to Erik.
He wanted to reach out and embrace her, but something very heavy and very stubborn seemed to be pinning his body to that exact spot on the bed, lying on his back with his hands behind his head. It seemed that his body could be persuaded to move them only down on his stomach, so he did that.
"I'd like to keep my mask", he said quietly to the ceiling. It was an absolute and total lie. He wanted to take it off and never put it on again. He wanted to walk around and not have people even look at him twice. He wanted to take the mask off now, right now, while it was still slightly light outside, and not be afraid of what he would see in her eyes; he wanted to feel her gentle fingers and soft lips on his face and believe that everything was fine. But he also wanted to take a hammer and nail the cursed thing to his skull so he could never take it off again, or, better yet, just disintegrate on the spot so he wouldn't have to move at all ever again.
"Of course. Whatever you wish." Alina took one of his hands to interlace her fingers with his, and moved a little closer, planting a little kiss where his jaw met his neck.
Erik was trying his best to hold it together; torn between the need to just relax and give in and this horrible, maddening compulsion to disappear immediately, he really couldn't do much but lie there unable to move.
"I lied", he managed.
"About?" Alina raised her head a little to look at him, but then saw the numbness in his unmoving eyes and decided on a different approach.
"Darling, I love you. Please tell me what you want. I can't understand if you don't tell me."
"I want to disappear", he whispered. After a long pause, he continued, "I want to know that you, would never, do something you don't want to do."
"Uh", Alina struggled for a second until she realized what was going on.
"No. No, I wouldn't. I would tell you."
"Not if you were afraid of me. Of… how I would react."
"I'm not. You'd know if I was. I know you'd be able to tell."
Well, that was a compelling argument.
"I just want to hold you", he said so quietly she could barely hear it, even with her head resting on his shoulder. "I just want to… not… I just want to

feel like… a normal man. I'd like you to - if you could, if you want to, I don't know - please don't do it if you don't want to - but if you do, I'd like you to take off my mask, because I just can't seem to do it, just this once, and I'd like to hold you and - feel normal."
Alina slowly raised her hand, untied the laces carefully not to tangle his hair, and removed the mask. It was all rather unceremonious. Erik's face looked like it always did, felt underneath her fingers like it always did, and Alina looked at him like she always did.
"Thank you." He allowed himself to close his eyes.
"Don't thank me. It's what I wanted." Alina's fingers traced little lines along his temples, down his cheekbones, over his cheeks, under his eyes, over his lips. "Darling, do you know what it's like to watch someone you love to disappear into a black hole you cannot reach?"
Erik said nothing. All he could focus on was the feel of her fingertips, which seemed infinitely more important than anything else in the universe at the moment.
"I am a million times grateful that you are no longer in that hole. Whatever you may think, just remember that. The only thing unbearable to me is losing you while you descend into your hell."
"I seem to be finding a way out", he finally managed. "I must be. I can see the sun from here."
Erik's hands slowly abandoned their stubborn paralysis and wrapped themselves around her. He could feel her body pressing back against his, warm, soft, and normal. He pressed his lips to hers very, very lightly and let out a sigh.
"Do you feel better?" she asked softly.
"Yes."

Chapter 39: Dandelions

While Oliver did notice a definite change in Erik's behavior the next time they met, he wasn't quite sure if he should say anything about it. Erik was a lot more attentive and kept asking Oliver if he was getting tired if he understood what Erik was saying if he wanted to stop and stretch - Oliver would have taken it as a relief and a sign of goodwill if Erik wasn't also much, much quieter otherwise. He barely said anything, barely responded to Oliver's attempts to make any kind of jokes, and spoke very quietly, as if afraid of upsetting him. Oliver, who had a healthy dose of self-respect and had so far never been seriously bothered by anything Erik could say to him, found that sudden change somewhat surprising. He couldn't figure out what had happened since the last time, but he had a feeling it was something unrelated to him. He was torn between his need to leave a very withdrawn man alone and not bother him, and his usual need to make people around him feel good - and Erik would have noticed how much this uneasy atmosphere was distracting Oliver if only Erik himself wasn't distracted by his inner turmoil. The fact Erik couldn't even tell Oliver was not on his usual level was the final straw for Oliver, and he decided that while Erik was unlikely to confide in him, he should at least try.

"Something's bothering you, Erik", Oliver finally remarked an hour later as he stretched and cracked his knuckles. He didn't even bother phrasing it as a question, and it seemed to trigger some alarm in Erik's already weary mind.

"What- why? What did I do?" he asked, sounding just a tiny bit desperate. "You're doing fantastic. Nothing is bothering me."

Oliver paused. "Really? You're satisfied with the progress so far?"

"Yes."

"I'm very happy to hear that." He's either lying or even more distraught than I thought. Oliver pushed his messy hair back and out of his eyes, then continued. "But I meant - you seem dejected. Is something wrong? If you're not feeling well, we don't have to do this. I can practice on my own for a day or two."

"I can continue."

"I'm serious. I know this is important, but I can manage on my own for a little bit."

"I'd like to do something right today if you don't mind", Erik replied after a short pause.

Oliver nodded, considering that. "Certainly. I understand." he turned back to the piano, having decided not to press any further for now.

Another hour later, Oliver was gathering his things and getting ready to leave home when he decided to try just one more time and see what would happen. Erik didn't seem to be in a much better mood even as the rehearsal was going better; even though Oliver gave his best to be friendly and for once repeated Erik's playing quite literally.

"This is fun", he stated, "it'll be even more fun when I join the orchestra. When were you planning on starting the orchestral rehearsals?"

"I don't know. By the end of summer, perhaps early Autumn. Heidel is in charge of assembling the orchestra, and he hasn't gathered them all yet. Not all students are here for the summer."

"Heidel? Did you agree to this, or is this his usual controlling nature?" Oliver chuckled a bit.

"No, it was my idea. He assembles the orchestra, and I'm in charge of finding the soloists."

"So, there're more soloists in this? Who? Why haven't I met them yet?"

"Because", Erik's voice wavered a bit as Oliver struck a chord. "I haven't found one yet. There's only one solo part aside from yours, and the person I had in mind refused it. So now I'll have to think of someone else."

"Ah, I'm sorry." Oliver was starting to think he was getting closer. "This is your first project of this kind, isn't it? I imagine the amount of responsibility on your shoulders is quite alarming. But don't worry. I've never seen a single project go smoothly in my life, since my first recital when I was, what, seven maybe."

"What went wrong at your first recital?" Erik asked, seemingly distracted by that as his voice returned to some semblance of life.

"Well, I was seven years old, and I cried." Oliver scratched his head.

"...cried? What for?"

"I think I got embarrassed? Or stressed? Anyway, in the end, I did gather myself, and it went just fine. I just remember crying behind the curtain in my music school before it started, and my grandma looking for me."

"Ah." Erik paused. Oliver couldn't tell at all what he was thinking, so he let the pause prolong a bit. "I don't know what I'm going to do without a lead violinist."

"But you won't be without a lead violinist. We'll find someone."

"I hope so. I don't have a backup plan. Or... energy to ask someone else right now."

"Why did this violinist refuse us?" Oliver asked, tilting his head. He tried to imagine how Erik might be feeling - a shy, introverted man with a lot of responsibility and a deadline - and realized how lonely his position probably was.

"Me. He refused me. I - don't want to talk about it. He hasn't even seen the sheet music. He refused to talk to me at all, even though I sent him letters and offered him everything I could think of." Erik took a deeper breath and

had an impulse to tell Oliver what had happened; now that he was already being tricked into a confession he decided to at least give him the full story. He more-or-less told him what happened; Oliver listened without a word, leaning on his cane until he finally decided to sit back down. Camila would have to get used to him being late.

"What a prick", he finally decided. "That's completely inappropriate. You didn't do anything rude to him; he has some personal problems."

"I have to tell you, this is how people normally react to me."

"Really? Why?" Oliver blurted out in surprise, then stopped himself. "You know what? Don't answer that. What's important is that", now I finally understand why you're so uptight around everyone, "that we will find a good violinist with or without this man. We're all in this together, you don't have to do everything by yourself. I can ask around if you want."

"I- thank you", Erik let out a surprised breath. "I don't know many musicians in this city, personally, and I don't want to repeat this process with someone who sees me for the first time."

"No problem. Well, I have to go home now", Oliver decided. "Are you staying?"

"Huh? No, no. I'm done for today."

"Good, good. Let's get some rest. Tomorrow, same place, same time? I'm looking forward to these rehearsals every day", Oliver chirped as he led Erik through the hallways and outside into the street. He wished him a friendly goodbye and went on his way home.

He was halfway home when he finally decided to turn around and go back. Something in this story didn't add up, something felt unfinished, and if Erik wasn't eager to talk to him openly he would have to get some context elsewhere. Oliver walked right back into the Conservatory not half an hour later, walked the stairs to the third floor, and knocked on the door of Heidel's office hoping to satisfy his curiosity.

"Good afternoon", two days later Oliver's voice chirped in his usual manner through an empty hallway of a cold Brooklyn building, his unseeing eyes facing the man at the door through messy bangs. "Do I have the pleasure of meeting Mr. Daniel Jonsson?"

Daniel was in a bad mood and had "fuck off" at the tip of his tongue already, but seeing the man confused him slightly; more so because he had the feeling he knew him somehow. "That's me", he retorted.

"Hello, then, my name is Oliver and we may have seen each other already, however, don't take it personally if I don't recognize you when I should. I don't see much of anybody these days", he shrugged his shoulders in a very innocent gesture, holding his cane in his hand. "In any case, we went to the same college, and I've come here on behalf of our common friends. Can I come in?"

"Unlikely", Daniel frowned. "I can't say I have any friends from college."

"But maybe you do, you just didn't realize it before", Olly shook his head to shake off the loose hair itching his face, and extended his hand to Daniel. "Or, maybe you're about to make some. You can call me Olly."

"Dan", he said, shaking his hand carefully. Unsure what to do with the blind man chirping cordially at his doorstep with no intention of leaving, he moved and gestured inside so that Oliver could pass. When Oliver didn't move, Dan finally realized he couldn't see him.

"Sir, you can come inside."

"If you call me sir one more time I might just go deaf as well", Oliver waved his finger at him and stepped carefully over the doorstep. "Now, just please warn me if I'm about to reach some stairs or trip on something. I wouldn't want to knock over a family heirloom."

"It's just an empty hallway. The living room is to the right", Dan said awkwardly. Oliver tapped his cane in front of him, then turned right into the living room and stopped, turning to wait for Dan.

"The couch is on your right, a few steps ahead. Do you want a drink?" Dan asked, painfully aware it was still too early for most people to drink. He was momentarily thankful that the man couldn't notice what a mess his apartment was. Daniel's daily living skills hadn't improved much since he was in college.

"Sure. It's six-o-clock somewhere", Oliver laughed. He could sense this kid's confusion, and hoped to diffuse the tension at least a little - if this continued for too long, he might get too frustrated to do what he was here to do.

Daniel poured a little bit of brandy into two glasses and put them on the table, sitting across from Oliver and waiting for a second before speaking. "Why are- that is, how can I help you?"

"I was hoping to meet you and have a chat. I heard a rumor you were very desperately wanted for a certain project I'm a part of", Oliver said cheerfully, sipping the brandy. Oh god. This kid must be so young. I can't fathom why someone would drink this brandy unless he had no money or didn't know any better. "In any case, I also heard we were colleagues from the same Academy, though I think we probably missed each other. It's been around ten years since I graduated."

"Right", Daniel said, growing slightly annoyed. "You've got the wrong idea - I don't have anything to do with the Academy anymore. I do independent projects now, and only with small bands."

"Oh no, I know that don't worry", Oliver laughed. "I'm not here on the behalf of the Academy. I haven't had any ties to them either in the past ten years - I do private gigs for hotels and restaurants. You know, they pay me a wonderful amount of money to do whatever I please as long as it fills the silence."

"Right, yeah", Daniel said. He worked one of those contracts for a very short time himself, but quit due to the fact he got bored to death after just a few months - he was given no instructions for the first time in his life, just a vague 'don't be too loud or distracting, and it drove him crazy - somehow he managed to always be too distracting no matter what he did unless he

completely shut down and played the most boring thing he could think of. Keeping that job was not worth the cost of alcohol required to keep him sane. "To be fair, I tried that, but it was pretty boring."

"You didn't like it?" Oliver raised his eyebrows. "Well, yes, it can be pretty boring. Most of the establishments are somewhat narrow-minded. I had to wait very long until I found a place where I liked playing, but now - they just sit me by the piano and say, Olly, do whatever it is that you do until midnight, and then you get snacks and whiskey. I do like snacks."

"Good for you", Dan said, then realized how that sounded. "I mean - I wasn't being sarcastic. It's good that you like it." This man's name was starting to seem familiar to him - there was a certain urban legend, back in the Academy, of a student who progressively lost his eyesight over the years and played his graduation concert almost completely blind, having learned the entire concert by heart including his parts, the rest of the orchestra, and the conductor's instructions. Daniel never really believed it - college students loved to gossip stories about their professors and upper classmates and embellished them generously at every retelling. He was in some of those stories, and he hated it.

"It's funny to me, you know?" Oliver said. "Back when I was in college I remember Heidel, Anderson, and Sterling - he was my mentor back then, head of the piano department - all yelling at me to take it more seriously and learn to listen to cues, goddamnit Riley, this isn't a bar, you can't just go off on a tangent and keep improvising for an hour. Turns out, you really can! And it's just, incredibly lucrative!" Oliver clapped his hands, laughing. "When I first told Fritz Heidel where I work, he just gave me this, the longest sigh in human history and told me I'll never mature as a person now. Hah!"

"That does sound like something Heidel would say", Dan groaned. "Jonsson, I know you have a lot of feelings but the word 'moderato' only has one and it's not the one you're doing right now! Look at me while I'm conducting!"

"Oh God", Oliver dragged his hands over his face. "I mean, I love Heidel, but he can be just so... unnecessarily mean, you know? There's no real

reason for this assault on my character, sir! I admit, I got drunk last night and forgot to practice! Put me in the Prison for Bad Musicians!"

"I don't think Heidel does anything but think sophisticated thoughts about serious and beautiful music", Daniel rolled his eyes, laughing a little as well.

"Oh, he does seem like that", Oliver nodded. "But you know, when I needed him most, Fritz gave his all to help me graduate, even though I was rapidly losing what little eyesight I had, and it was becoming apparent how unlikely it would be for me to stay there. I was so close to falling into despair and giving up - and he made sure I had everything I needed to graduate. I think it was a precedent in the old Academy, to go so far out of their way to accommodate me, and it's all his doing." he puffed a little. "Even if he bullied me every step of the way. Oliver, just because you're going blind, doesn't mean I'll tolerate you falling out of tempo- ugh."

"Good for you", Daniel replied, this time making no effort to conceal his sarcasm. "I can't say he extended that sort of effort to the rest of us. I'm not the only one who wants nothing to do with the Academy anymore." It was only after the words left his mouth that he realized what he'd said - yes, well, the rest of us could see and some of us had nobody to blame but ourselves - some of us may not have accepted help even if it was offered -

Oliver straightened and stopped laughing. "That was his mistake, yes. He should have helped you, too. I'm sorry he didn't. Blindness isn't the only ailment that can befall a man, and some are less obvious than others. We gain nothing by pushing students to the brink of sanity. Musicians shouldn't have an expiration date."

Daniel kept silent for almost a minute. "I'm sorry. That was... I must have left my head in my ass when I woke up this morning. I meant no offense."

"None was taken, buddy. Academy does sometimes eat its children - I've seen it happen to others, especially those that couldn't take the pressure. Personally, it never bothered me what my teachers thought of me - maybe that was why I was spared. They'd get mad and yell a little, then we'd find some compromise, I'd get my grades up so I can keep getting my

scholarship money and we'd all go on our merry way. But a lot of my friends weren't so lucky." he sighed. "Some of them didn't even finish. Just went into a completely different profession. What a shame."

"Well, they got out in time, because it's just the same after you graduate", Daniel spoke feverishly, waving his hands. "I thought at least once you get the stupid diploma from the goddamn New York Academy of Music you can do what you want - but no, it's just more people telling you exactly what to do and how and how to properly play music like a real musician. And not just that, how to properly stand like a real musician, how to properly dress, how to speak, and who to spend time with - it's just bullshit down!" he couldn't stop himself for some reason - Daniel had spent a lot of time complaining bitterly to his classmates how bored and stressed he was at the same time, but seeing as he was one of the tops of his class nobody took him seriously; people thought him some kind of eccentric, whiny genius and usually dismissed his complaints. "Ever since I was a kid, my parents, they are both in the Philharmonic - it was always Daniel this, Daniel that, Daniel stop playing and go practice, Daniel you'll never get into a proper school if you keep making a fool of yourself there is some strict set of rules for how you're supposed to be acting every second of the day since you're born to be a real musician, but whatever it is it always eludes me! Why do I need to stand like a fucking candle and wear a suit and play with perfect seriousness and poise and talk stupid shit about the mathematical complexity of Bach when, in fact, I don't really like Bach? I like traveling Romani bands a lot more than ninety percent of Bach!" he finished, suddenly feeling very ashamed of his outburst.

"Bach does sometimes sound like a freight train going at a steady pace", Oliver admitted. "Then I suppose, more modern music is more up your alley? More romanticism, feeling, expressiveness?"

"Something like that", Daniel shrugged. "You know, I wouldn't mind playing Bach either if they just let me show any sign of life while I'm doing it."

"Of course", Oliver grinned at him. "But then you wouldn't be showing your appreciation for his mathematical complexity, would you?"

"God forbid somebody failed to mention that."

"I now understand why Erik wants you so badly as a soloist", Oliver suddenly mentioned. "It's very emotionally expressive music he makes, almost makes you feel unreal - it might be right up your alley."

"Erik?" Daniel blinked. "Who?"

"Erik Giry? Heidel's new pet project? Didn't he come to you recently?"

"Oh, Giry", Daniel frowned. "I forgot about that. Yeah, I already said no, sorry."

"You refused?" Oliver feigned surprise and disappointment. "But I was looking forward to it! We could be on the same team, wreaking havoc and annoying Heidel!"

"Heidel isn't leading it, Giry is. It's his symphony." Daniel paused. "I'm not sure how he got so much freedom seeing as he's a nobody. Aside from conducting it, Heidel won't get that involved in the making of it."

"Fritz may have gone soft in his old days", Oliver smiled. "I can't believe you refused. Erik - we all call him Erik, you don't have to bother with the last name - talked all day about how much he wanted you there; apparently, he heard you play in some string quartet six months ago and already decided back then. But you didn't hear that from me", he finished smoothly.

"Giry talks exactly like someone who thinks he invented music himself", Daniel burst. "He wants people to just listen to what he wants and make it exactly so; I bet if he could single-handedly play all of the instruments himself, he'd gladly do it, and then say that he's the only one who does it right."

Oliver burst out laughing. "Yes, that's exactly the impression he gives. And it's not that far off from the truth. He has a very specific idea for this concert, and it means a lot to him."

"Exactly. I don't need someone scrutinizing me and barking orders at me all day because I started a millisecond too early and ruined the suspense or something", Daniel mumbled. "He looks like he might start correcting my posture at any second."

"Oh, I've had the pleasure to start working with him already", Oliver bit his lip. "As you can probably guess, I can't read sheet music. Erik is personally teaching me my part of the symphony, for two hours, every day except Sunday."

"And?" Daniel couldn't help his curiosity.

"Well, he does get very stubborn when something is especially important to him - and when we start rehearsing, he doesn't know when to stop until you very directly tell him you've had enough and can't sit for another minute. But he does try. He left some of the parts for me to improvise on, or interpret in my way - he said it's much more important to him that we all play it as we mean it, rather than just repeat the motions blindly." Oliver smiled. "Which, of course, doesn't mean he tolerates mistakes in the slightest. And it's a pretty challenging piece, I can tell you that. In any case, have you heard any of it yet?"

"No, not really", Daniel admitted. "I just... really disliked him and refused on the spot. I didn't want another stuck-up maestro at my back with a whip and endless snide remarks."

"Oh, I'd like to see him dare", Oliver smiled sweetly, tapping his fingers on his cane. "He knows he's a nobody as much as we do - all that's stopping his orchestra from falling apart is the beauty of the symphony and our - mine and Heidel's and the orchestra's - loyalty. But I'm telling you that in confidence. If you snitch on me, I'll be very disappointed."

Daniel remained silent for a moment. "In any case, I already said no. I don't think he'd accept me now - he looks much too proud for that." he didn't think it necessary to mention his behavior did nothing to help; either Oliver knew about it or would find out soon enough.

"Oh, his pride will most certainly be hurt. But that doesn't mean he'll refuse." Oliver stood up. "In any case, I've bothered you long enough. Thanks for your time - no, don't get up, I can find my way now - thanks for your time, and thanks for entertaining me with some juicy academic gossip. I hope to meet you again, if nothing else, in the audience when we're performing the symphony. Though it will be a shame if another fellow has to take your place, as I'm sure he wouldn't do as good of a job." He walked out of the room, smiling to himself at the deafening, panicked silence that ensued as he was leaving. He knew that last part - have fun watching us from the audience - would strike a chord with any musician, and soon enough, Daniel stumbled out of the room behind him and asked,

"What can I do, though?"

"Oh?" Oliver turned back. "Just go back to him and tell him you've changed your mind. That should be enough. And try not to tell him to fuck off again, though I understand the appeal of it", he winked at Daniel, thankfully unable to see the young man blushing violently. He rummaged through his pockets and took out a small piece of paper. "That's his address - you can also talk to Heidel, of course, but if you're not ready to face two giant egos at the same time, you can just go to Erik directly. I'm sure he'll be very happy about you joining us. Now, I have to rush. My wife gets very worried when I'm late, which is always, and I'd like to stop making her mad."

Skyscrapers and busy streets changed to little houses and huts in the immigrant part of Coney Island as Daniel tried to make his way around the part of New York he'd never been in before. Not that his own, tiny, cramped apartment in Brooklyn was any better than these - at least these people seemed to have gardens and trees, something Dan missed dearly in his day-to-day life - but people here seemed different, slightly suspicious of him as they whispered in a language he couldn't understand. He was impressed by how good the village looked - immigrants usually lived in the outskirts, in poorly-made and even worse maintained houses with very little electricity and running water; but this particular part seemed to be flourishing. Either its residents were profiting greatly from the new amusement parks being built around the town, or some other force had managed to get funding from the city council. Either way, houses looked neat, roads were wide enough,

and streetlights looked like they were well-maintained; Daniel even saw public fountains which made him think the village was hooked up to the city's plumbing system. It was all very quaint. Daniel clutched the violin case in his hand as he walked.

It didn't take him long to find a small house on the edge of the village, not very ornate but incredibly cozy-looking (except for weirdly heavy bolts on the door and windows). It didn't have much of a garden, only a few bushes of forget-me-nots around it that seemed to be having a life of their own. Behind the house, he could see an empty plot of land full of dandelions. Daniel grew up in a luxurious house with a manicured lawn where his parents still lived, and he couldn't imagine someone just letting dandelions grow behind their house; they were invasive and spread quickly, and were generally considered a pest. He took a minute to admire their bright, yellow color from a distance as he gathered his courage to knock.

"Just a minute!" he heard a cheerful voice from inside, and a tall, pretty, dark-haired woman opened the door swiftly, smiling at him with contagious warmth.

"I- may have the wrong address, sorry", he mumbled in confusion. "I was looking for Mr. Giry."

"Mr. Giry? Oh, you mean Erik!" she laughed. "Yes, he lives here, he should be back soon. And, if I may, who's asking?"

"I'm Daniel Jonsson", he replied. "I- we recently spoke about an audition for a solo violinist." That was close enough to the truth, anyway.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Jonsson, I'm Alina Boričević, you can call me Alina", she shook his hand politely. "He's just taking our neighbor's son home, he should be back right away - would you like to come in? I just made some lemonade", she finished, extending her arm to invite him in.

"Oh. Sure", Daniel said. "Thank you, ma'am." hoping she wouldn't notice he didn't quite remember her foreign name, he stepped over to the doorstep, taking in the interior - the neat little furniture, the warm kitchen, the ornate

harpsichord in the corner, and the absolute mass of paper stars hanging from the ceiling oh God what are those -

"Don't worry about those", the young woman said, following his gaze. "They won't fall on your head, they've been there for a while now. Please, sit."

Daniel sat obediently, laying his violin case down with care as the woman produced a large pitcher of lemonade and two glasses.

"I like the wildflowers behind your house", he told her. He felt slightly awkward; the woman couldn't have been that much older than him but something about her motherly behavior reminded him so much of the nanny who watched him as a kid that he reverted to some older, less cynical version of himself against his will. (It was an effect Alina often had on people, and it was very much intentional - but to be fair, Daniel had no way of knowing that.)

"Oh, the dandelions?" she laughed. "You know, one day they just started growing, and then before I knew it the whole area was full of them. I don't mind - I like their color, and you can make very sweet syrup out of them. Technically, that little plot of land doesn't belong to anybody, so it's not like they're bothering anyone."

"Yes, it's nice", he agreed, sipping his lemonade and feeling like a child. "Thank you for the drink, ma'am - it's refreshing on such a hot day."

As he talked, the heavy door opened and his future boss - his future boss oh God walked inside quietly, dressed in all black as usual with that eerie white mask over his face. He smiled at the woman, then went serious again as he noticed Daniel.

"Mr. Jonsson", he stated calmly as yellow eyes fixed Daniel on the spot like a bug under a microscope. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Oliver gave me your address", he blurted out. The man still gave him the creeps - it wasn't his appearance or his quiet deep voice; it had to be some air around Erik that made Daniel think he was at all times just a step away

from snapping or lashing out at him like he noticed everything that was wrong about Daniel with detailed scrutiny and would list it all under slightest excuse. The evident stiff self-control in his demeanor made it worse. If cutting him off and sending him away angrily on his doorstep was hard, sitting in Erik's kitchen and attempting to talk politely was infinitely worse. "He- he said I should come to talk to you directly."

"I'm sure Oliver had good reasons", Erik's terrifying gaze softened a bit. "Darling", he turned to the woman, "I'm sorry, are we bothering you if we talk here?"

"Not at all. I'll be in my room if you need me", she said sweetly and excused herself, leaving Daniel alone with the goddamn Minotaur currently sizing him up for dinner.

Taking out another glass, Erik sat on the chair directly across from him and poured himself some lemonade, without drinking any. "Well. I see that Alina has already made sure you feel comfortable. Whatever you'd like to say, I'm listening", he finished, leaning quietly on the back of his chair.

"I spoke to Oliver Riley today. He told me you still don't have your solo violinist", Daniel started, wondering how he'd navigate his way out of this in the least painful manner.

"I don't. You are the only one I asked for specifically, and you refused." Erik replied matter-of-factly, letting the uncomfortable silence spread around them. Daniel would have tried to wiggle out of it with a half-apology or spin the situation to make it easier, but it was hard to do when Erik spoke so bluntly.

"Right", he said. "Well... I just came by to apologize for being rude, that is all. I'm sorry."

Erik looked at him for a second like he couldn't believe Daniel assumed him stupid enough to believe that was it, then bowed his head down slightly. "Apology accepted."

"I mean, I just wanted to say - you caught me at a bad time, I wouldn't normally react that way, in fact, I normally don't, I just didn't expect it at all" he fumbled until Erik raised his hand to interrupt him.

"Stop. I said it's fine. I won't hold it against you. People are rude sometimes, including me, and I understand. I don't care why you said what you said to me back then, but I appreciate you coming all this way to say you're sorry."

"Oh, because-"

"As I said, I don't care about your reasons. We can stop talking about it now", Erik said, looking like he'd love to stop talking about it now.

Daniel shut his mouth and stared at Erik in frustrated silence.

"Is there anything else you'd like to discuss with me?" Erik tilted his head slightly, his yellow eyes drilling holes in Daniel's skull.

"Yes", Daniel managed through gritted teeth, growing increasingly annoyed.

"Please, then, I'm listening."

"Well", Daniel pulled out of himself word by word, much to Erik's silent amusement, "Oliver Riley told me today that you still need a solo violinist, and I could use a new gig, and he told me I'd probably be good for the part. He also told me he heard your music and that he thinks I'd like it", he finished.

"That's very kind of Oliver", Erik said, keeping a very serious demeanor aside from one corner of his mouth twitching ever-so-slightly upwards.

Daniel stared at Erik as the latter practically emanated smug satisfaction, realizing Erik won't help him at all and won't quit until Daniel said it himself, plain and simple.

"In that case, if the position is still open, I'd like to audition for it", he squeezed out furiously. He wondered if he could set Erik on fire by looking

at him hard enough before Erik did it to him first.

Erik looked at him thoughtfully for a second or two. Daniel wondered if he was considering toying with him a little more when Erik straightened in his seat and said in earnestly, "No need to audition. The spot is yours if you want it."

"I-" Daniel backed away in surprise at the sudden change in the eerie man's demeanor. "What? Just like that? I brought my violin- "

"I've heard you play before, I know you can do it", Erik said, opening one of his desk drawers to rummage through his papers. "The only question is whether you want to. Here's a sample from the first movement - take a look at it, no, not now. Take a look at it when you're home and decide if you like it. It's not easy it's quite difficult. If you like it, you'll probably like the rest as well. If you don't like it, you'll get sick of it before the end of this week, probably, so you don't have to bother in that case." he held out the papers in his hand to Daniel, who hesitantly took them.

"Okay", he said, looking at the papers in his hand.

"When you decide, you can come to either me or Heidel, and then we'll start. If you decide to join us. That is all." Erik said, holding out his hands in a peaceful and surprisingly shy gesture. "Do you have questions?"

"I- no", Daniel said, holding the papers carefully. "You want me to get through this by the end of this week?" he did have some performances scheduled for the weekend, and it was far too late to cancel them- it was already Thursday.

"Do you have better things to do?" Erik said by reflex and tilted his head, then suddenly realized he said that exact sentence to someone long ago, remembered how that went, and regretted it immediately.

Luckily, Daniel was having none of that and he straightened in his seat angrily. "I do. Things I can't cancel if I want to be able to buy food and pay bills this week. I can assure you my performance will be much more to your liking if I'm not hungry and homeless. Sir."

"That's fair. I overstepped a line." Erik nodded. "In that case, next week, if you can. I'd prefer to have started all rehearsals by this time next month."

"Erik?" Alina peeked out of the room as soon as Jonsson left and Erik locked the door behind him.

"Yes, darling?" he asked softly.

"Is that baby boy your friend?" Alina asked, trying to contain her smile.

"I... god damn it, Alina," he shook his head. "He's young, but he's a grown man. He's my soloist."

"Oh but he's so delightful!" Alina pressed her hands to her cheeks, turning behind her. "Amelija! Erik adopted a spoiled little prince! Little lord Fauntleroy as a pet! Pale and neurotic, and dying to prove himself!"

"I'm noticing a pattern here", Amelija grumbled.

"Did he give you any trouble before I got here?" Erik asked seriously.

"No, absolutely not. He sat there like a little bird and commented how he likes the dandelions around our house", Alina laughed. "I can't believe he came across town to apologize to you! I was half expecting him to bring chocolates and a flower bouquet!"

"Alina, if I came home and saw him talking to you holding chocolates and a flower bouquet, we'd be hiding a dead body right now", he said matter-of-factly. "Well, apparently, he can be civil with both Oliver and you. That's a good start." he just can't be civil with me, for whatever reason.

"Of course, he can. We're not his strict genius boss", Alina replied. "He wants to impress you so badly it's practically oozing off of him - but he's just so stubborn and proud, there is just no way he'll ever admit it."

"I hope you're right", Erik scratched his temple. "Your eavesdropping habit is proving more useful than I thought."

"I can't believe you didn't let him play for us", Amelija's voice sounded from her room.

"Absolutely not. None of us are ready for that", Erik shook his head. "He would have done it to apologize, or to prove something, I don't know. All I know is that he was obviously dreading it, and so was I, and it would've been a disaster. He's not allowed to play a single note in front of me until I figure out what I'm going to do about the obvious", he nodded at Alina. "I need your help."

"With what?"

"This little Pechorin needs a lot of practice, from what I've heard, until he's ready for a more serious concert. There's a lot of potentials there, but he's completely rusty. Somebody is going to have to supervise him, and it definitely won't be Heidel - they have some sort of personal issue, I don't care. In any case", he sighed, "I need your advice. I have no idea what to do with him. He'll crumble if I push him too hard, but pushing is exactly what he needs to get out of this lazy, bitter complacency."

"You want me to teach you how to manipulate students into doing their best?" Alina laughed.

"Oh, I know how to do that. I want you to show me how to do it without antagonizing them."

Chapter 40: Audition

Erik spent every day of the following week at the Conservatory - entering it and talking to the woman at the reception never got easier, but playing with Olly was a breeze; the man was cheerful, easy to talk to, and quick to learn - he was, by all means, a better student than Erik was a teacher. He responded to Erik's stubbornness thoughtfully, but never let him go too far; and whenever he didn't know or understand something, he'd say it so plainly and with a sincere, apologetic smile that Erik had no choice but to simply try and help him.

Talking to Heidel, on the other hand, never got much easier - Heidel was never going to be any less intimidating to him, but even as Erik kept his guard up around him, Heidel seemed to slowly relax and talk to him more openly and with a certain respect that would sometimes float to the surface through his stiff posture and condescension. Erik was thankful to both men for their apparent cooperation and, in Olly's case, even some tentative hints at friendship - but he found his thoughts often wandering to where the hell is Jonsson and why hasn't appeared already. Yes, they had agreed to give him ten days, but Erik thought that the score he had given him wasn't so difficult to read that Daniel would need all ten days - and the gnawing, ever-present thought in the back of his head kept telling him that Daniel simply wouldn't appear; that he had discovered something either in the symphony or in Erik's behavior that had finally turned him away forever. It was an irrational thought - at least Alina said so when he hinted at it - but it wouldn't leave him alone, and the best he could do was to distract himself with work that was right in front of him and simply wait, wondering at every knock on the door if it would turn out to be Daniel, asking the receptionist every afternoon if somebody had come and asked for him. Even the woman - Caroline - was growing a little concerned for the masked man who asked her the same question politely every day: "Has someone named Jonsson been here, or left a message for me?". Every day she would

say no, and he would thank her with an equally polite tone, his eyes turning visibly distraught. It was a strange ritual, and Caroline even felt a strange mix of frustration and guilt that she was, without any ill intent, hurting him somehow every day with this.

Finally, on Friday afternoon as he was already losing his mind wondering when Daniel would appear, Erik decided to talk. He was in Heidel's office with Oliver, discussing the progress on the rehearsals and how they'd start looking for a venue as soon as the concert season started in September, when he decided to, for lack of better wording, reach out for help.
"Daniel Jonsson has agreed to play the solo violin", Erik said with slight insecurity in his voice. "He claims it has something to do with you."
"Hahaha", Oliver laughed. "Well, it wasn't very hard to talk him into it. He was practically begging me to just say hey, let's be friends and make music together."
"Do people normally like you so much at first sight?" Erik asked with curiosity before he could stop himself.
"They do", Heidel answered instead. "Against his best efforts. I've never seen my colleagues bend so many of their rules like they did back when Olly was in college."
"But I asked them so very nicely", Oliver smiled innocently, leaning his chin on his cane. "It's not my problem everyone else was too afraid to ask. But, back to the point - why are you two having so many problems with that kid? He's a little juvenile, but he wants to impress everyone so badly - surely he's not so hard to handle?"
"I don't know what to tell you", Heidel rubbed his eyes. "I thought so too - yes, he wants to impress everyone, but he doesn't want to work for it. He has massive amounts of talent - so many things come so easy to him - and as soon as something does not, he gets discouraged and gives up."
Erik's mind raced, trying to connect the dots - it wasn't something he thought about that often, but Oliver seemed to understand immediately.
"Fritz, and what did you do when he was bad at something?"

"We'd just tell him, like everyone else," Heidel replied. "He had no special treatment from me."

"The way I see it", Oliver tapped his fingers against the cane. "As a kid, he's a little prodigy, everything goes smoothly, and everyone adores him. Then, when he's only sixteen, he gets into college and things get harder, suddenly everyone is criticizing him, his parents keep acting like he's already an adult, and everyone is disappointed in him every day. He tries his best for a while, but it never goes back to how it was - it's never again him playing something with joy and people just liking it. I think he just wants to play something with joy, and for people to like it. Maybe you all should have let him be a kid a little longer."
"Maybe", Heidel said bitterly. "And maybe, if he had what it took, getting him the best education available as early as possible would have unlocked his potential."
"It's not as if the potential would have expired, is it? If he's that talented?" Oliver shrugged.
"I've never been one to put much faith in someone's talent", Heidel waved his hand dismissively. "Surely, some people have it, and some don't. I think I don't. I think what makes you a musician is whether you simply decide to be one, or not. I decided long ago that I would be a musician - and I've worked every day since to achieve that. Of course, there are things I cannot do and cannot be; I'm a theoretician, a conductor, and a professor. I can be a critic, too, I can be a director or whatever is asked of me. I don't have what my colleagues would call a gift from God - I know I'll never compose the next big masterpiece, or pour my heart out through an instrument. And yet, all the same, I am here. I am here because I decided. And so are you", he pointed one strict finger at Erik. "My colleagues will fawn over your unseen talent, admire the fact you're self-taught as if it were some great proof that music is some divine grace bestowed randomly upon the few geniuses in each generation. It's not. Not to say you lack talent- of course, your work is inspired and creative - but all that talent wouldn't have helped you one bit if you hadn't woken up every day with a singular goal on your mind, and then worked to get there. Music is not divine grace - it's something we deserve; we earn the right to call ourselves artists through our actions, through showing up every single day to give our absolute best because we hear the music, it touches us and we decide to do it. And that is the reason I respect you and don't respect Jonsson. You were both born with incredible gifts, but the fact you taught yourself how to play violin all alone is why you have my respect - not some miracle of birth."

"You're saying the difference is that… I practiced more?" Erik managed.
"What other difference should matter to me?" Heidel shrugged. "Sure. Dvorak can write the New World Symphony, and I can only conduct it. I respect him for doing things I never could - but I've had plenty of students capable of doing things I never could, and yet they never actually did them, so on what grounds am I supposed to respect them?"
"I don't think what I did was necessarily virtue", Erik said quietly. "I just had nothing else- if he did, how can I blame him for wanting other things from life?"
"Fritz", Oliver scratched his chin, eager to diffuse that emotional bomb, "By God, I can't tell if you're much more of a snob than I had previously thought, or far less."
"Call me a snob all you want, Olly", Heidel raised his eyebrows. "I was there when you practiced ten hours a day for your graduation concert."
"You were the reason I was practicing ten hours a day-"
"Really? Well, I did you a favor. What else were you going to do? Lay home in bed, depressed and blind?"
"Maestro, you know, I don't normally let people talk to me the way you talk to me."
"Neither do I." Heidel smiled, then turned his head quickly when he heard a soft knock on the door.
"Hello", Daniel managed at the sight of three men sitting in the room, suddenly very aware of the fact his shirt was not pressed and his jacket - once very expensive - had seen better days. "Um, the receptionist told me you'd be rehearsing today so I thought I'd come."

"Dan!" Oliver exclaimed, his face lighting up with joy. "Hey! I was starting to worry you changed your mind!"

"Hi, Olly", Daniel replied politely. The two other men didn't look quite as friendly, but Heidel nevertheless stood up to shake his hand.
"Good to see you again, Jonsson", he nodded. He then turned to Erik and gestured for him to take over.
Erik looked at him for a second, then held out his hand with a quiet, "Hello, Mr. Jonsson. I'm glad you could come. Have you read the sample I gave you?"
"I read most of it", Daniel rushed shaking his hand very quickly and feebly,

"I didn't have time to go through it all, I had some other obligations-" it was a lie. He had plenty of time, it's just that the stupid thing was so damn overwhelmingly difficult that he couldn't get through it alone after playing fairly easy things for the past two years. After a few incredibly exhausting attempts he got frustrated and gave up, hoping a lame excuse would be enough and they didn't need him to demonstrate any special skill anytime soon.
Heidel opened his mouth with that expression on his face, but before he could say something about how Jonsson, you should have put in some more effort, you should be able to tackle these things on your own by now, Oliver laughed and interrupted him.
"Dan, by God, what madman would expect you to learn it all alone? It's so goddamn hard, and I'm the one getting private lessons!" That was a lie - Oliver was a fantastic pianist and the only thing hard for him was remembering it all by heart. He waved his hand at Erik. "Luckily our new maestro is also a violinist, so he can help you now that you've finally joined us!"
"Oh, you are?" Great! I bet he can play it flawlessly and doesn't think it's hard at all!
"That is if you've decided to join us", Erik corrected. "Which we've… sort of forgot to ask. But, as I've promised already, the decision is entirely yours."
"Oh", Daniel blushed slightly. "Well, yes, that's why I'm here. I wanted to join. I liked it", he finished.
Erik's mouth spread into a small smile at that last comment, surprising everyone present. "Good. We'll start today then. I'll answer any questions you have."
Well for example, what on Earth possessed you to write something like that, sir? "Okay. Thanks."
"I'd like you all to please get lost from my office now", Heidel announced putting his glasses back. "I know you all think this room is the center of the universe, but I do have my regular job as well. I'll see you later."
Daniel and Erik both shot him incredibly offending looks and opened their mouths to say something, but were promptly stopped by Oliver's laughter as he stood up.
"Fritz, you have some nerve. You know very well this is a place of pain, we're just all masochists. Now, let's go", he nudged Daniel with his cane,

but avoided touching Erik - either because he couldn't locate him or because of some other instinct - and ushered them out. "Dante, Virgil, it's time to get out of hell."
"And you are, then?" Erik followed quickly.
"Oh, I'm an angel, I'm just here to save you." Oliver stretched in the hallway. "Well, I'm done for today, so you two have fun."
"Do you need-" Erik started.
"No, I don't need help, I know my way out. Good day, gentlemen." he tipped his hat and walked confidently outside as they watched him.
Erik and Daniel turned to each other simultaneously after he left, unsure what to say.
"Right, um", Daniel took the sheet music out of his violin case. "This is yours, sir."
"You don't have to call me sir if you don't want to", Erik said with amusement as he took the papers. He was aware he was still calling Daniel Mr. Jonsson, but had no intention of stopping until he told him to. He was more comfortable with these strict professional boundaries, at least on his part, even if he had no intention to enforce any particular authority with this little Pechorin. He diverted his gaze to the sheet music. "Well, I guess we better find a classroom."
Daniel took out his violin - it was such a beautiful instrument, Erik noticed, simple and elegant as if it was made exactly for a young promising man on his way to glory. Erik still played on Mikita's old violin, which though beautiful in its own right, could not compare to this - this violin probably cost more money than Erik and Alina had when they first arrived in America.
Erik sat in one of the chairs in the tiny empty classroom, a little further from Daniel as he tuned his instrument. He thought Daniel would sit after he set his sheet music on the stand, but he remained standing, slightly too stiff for Erik's taste.
"Whenever you're ready", Erik waved his hand at him. "Just play whichever part you'd like. I just want to get a feeling for how you're doing."
Daniel shuffled through the papers and picked a particular phrase that seemed to him slightly more doable than the rest - it was the one that stuck with him when he tried playing it at home.
To his horror, as he started playing he found that he suddenly couldn't make sense of it at all anymore. His violin screeched and everything sounded all

wrong, and the more he tried to correct himself the less it made any kind of sense. He stumbled and stuttered through it, and Erik, despite occasionally wincing at a mistake or slip of Dan's finger, let him finish without interruption. Dan somehow managed to gather himself by the end and play a few bars half-decently. He lowered his bow, thinking it may not have been that bad after all when he caught Erik's eyes and saw in them a look he very well knew.

"Mr. Jonsson", Erik uttered slowly. "That didn't sound like anything to me." and even though his voice was soft and quiet, he hit a very painful nerve- Daniel cast his eyes downward in embarrassment, biting down tears. It struck Erik with surprise - this young man technically
had more qualifications than Erik did, and was a graduated musician from one of the most prestigious colleges - it made no sense why he would be acting like a teenager getting scolded instead of a soloist getting instructions from his conductor.
"But that's alright", Erik continued in what was hopefully a supportive and gentle tone of voice, feeling sorry for the young man. It didn't matter to him why Jonsson acted this way; only that he stopped immediately. "It's only the first day. Please try again, from the beginning."
Daniel sighed and lifted his bow once again, hoping Erik wouldn't notice his hand trembling slightly.
This time he didn't even get through the phrase when Erik lifted his hand. "Stop. Please", he added, hoping that would help him sound less condescending.
Daniel stopped, feeling like he might cry soon if this went on.
Erik tapped his fingers on the table in thought, his gaze distant. "You said you read it at home."
"I did", Daniel said, trying to sound defiant but his voice also trembled ever-so-slightly; so slightly that someone other than Erik wouldn't have registered it.
"I believe you. But even prima vista, this shouldn't be such a problem for you", he remarked absentmindedly. He looked over at Daniel again, who was very obviously preparing to bolt out the door. Erik sighed. "Mr. Jonsson, please sit down. I have no intention of prolonging this torture any longer."
Ah, so this is it. It was good while it lasted. Well, it was terrible, so maybe

it's better if it's over. Dan sat down on one of the chairs across from Erik.
"I'll admit my handwriting is not the easiest to read", Erik shrugged. "That certainly doesn't help."
"It's alright. I've read worse." but it certainly didn't help, no.
"What is the matter? What are you afraid of?" Erik asked. "You've been acting this way since we met. What do you imagine I'll do to you?"
"Nothing", Daniel lied. "I'm just out of practice. I've been playing pretty easy stuff for the last few years."
"The way you played that easy stuff made me think you were wanting something more, and I was certain you could do this", Erik said gently. "And now, you won't even drag the bow against the strings properly to let out a decent tone. I simply wanted to skim over this movement with you, so you'd get a feeling for it - but you're trying to play it so literally you might as well be one of those mechanical wind-up pianos. One of your strings is out of tune, and you didn't even notice - wait, I'm not finished. Not to mention this stiff posture you've been having. I'm not going to whack you with a stick if you relax, you know - I don't even own a conductor's baton", he waved his hand and tried to smile slightly, desperate to diffuse the tension. He could have put it differently, in simple terms - you play hard parts like a coward and easy ones like you're bored - but that wouldn't be very true to the advice Alina gave him; she told him to be as specific as he could, to point out exactly what was bothering him and what he wanted instead, and no matter what, Erik, don't start lecturing him on who he is as a person based on his performance. Nobody likes that. Only stuffy old professors do that, and their students laugh behind their backs. Trust me. And, by god, don't remember to praise him when he does something right. How is he supposed to know what you want from him otherwise?
"Well, sir, I'm afraid it's not quite obvious what it was exactly you wanted from me", Daniel managed through his teeth in frustration. "This is what they taught me at the academy, but it's impossible to do with this, this incomprehensible mess!"
"I never attended any academy", Erik said quietly. "And you're right - this incomprehensible mess is impossible to pull through if you're constantly worried about what you're supposed to do. That's why I wanted you, specifically, to play this solo part - you have a particular style I like, that I thought would fit this composition very well. I'm disappointed you decided to abandon that style entirely as soon as you were faced with a challenge."

Daniel stared at him wide-eyed for a little too long for Erik's comfort. "You- never went to the Academy?"
"No", he replied coldly. "And I'd appreciate it if you could stop gawking at me."
"But how did you learn to"
"There has been music long before people started building academies", he replied. "I'm self-taught."
"Self-taught?" Daniel's head spun. "Y-you taught yourself how to compose?"
"Would you lend me your violin?" Erik interrupted, not eager to start talking about his life. "I could simply show you what I want from you. All this criticism is annoying even to me."
"Sure", Daniel passed him the fiddle and bow. Unlike most of his colleagues, he had no problem lending other people his violin - it was a beautiful and painfully expensive thing his parents bought him when he got into college, but Daniel could play equally well on any other violin they gave him. Some of his poorer classmates would buy a used one or share it among two or three of them until they could save to buy each their own; if they had exams at the same time it would be a huge embarrassment if one of them showed up without an instrument. Daniel had a friend, back then, who was one such student - Daniel often stayed long after his exams to pass his violin to him so he could attend the exam without others' snide remarks. He wondered where Louis was now - he moved away to Philly after two years when he finally got a scholarship there, and Daniel never returned his letters, until they gradually stopped coming.

"This is an outstanding piece of craftsmanship", Erik remarked, tuning the violin. Daniel thought he would take off the black gloves before playing, but he seemed unbothered by them.
"Ah. Thanks. It was a gift." from my mom.
"I'll be careful with it", Erik carefully tuned the traitorous string that kept bothering him for the past half-hour. Daniel tried passing him his tuning fork, but he just shook his head at him, raised the bow, and started playing without any preamble.
"Now you can probably tell", he said, "I was hoping you'd play this part not because you were very good at following orders and proper form - quite the contrary."

"Uh-huh", Daniel blinked. "Um, I have no idea how you did any of that, or why it works together."
"Technically speaking, it's not harder than what you did in the academy", Erik pointed out, and Daniel diverted his eyes for some reason. "The problem is that the effect you need to produce is a bit different. This part", he sifted through the papers and pointed. "This is not supposed to sound smooth and pretty. It's supposed to be grating against both your ears and your mind. It's there on purpose, and will be resolved here", he pointed again at the next page. "But if you're going to produce that effect, you can't go halfway, which is what you're doing. You need to show some more conviction. Press into the bow on the legato, and bounce it on the staccato. I want it to have a screeching quality to it, but I want it to be very obvious, pronounced, and intentional, which will require a lot of practice." He played a few more notes to demonstrate it. "What you've been doing is carrying the bow too much - I'm sure you know this from school. You're scared to make it too loud, so you start lifting the bow, and you end up with just… noise."
"Huh", Daniel frowned. "Alright, I understand." I just don't think I can do it.
"On this next page, the resolution", Erik pointed with Daniel's bow. He was getting so caught up in explaining he forgot how uneasy he was to be alone in a room with an unfamiliar young man. "Technically, you did that perfectly, not a single note out of its place. I have no complaints. Except one", he added just as Daniel started smiling. "It's kind of boring. You didn't add anything to it, no dynamic, no feeling, you just wanted to get through it. Now, that's not so surprising, because that part is too easy for you. It was written to be boring and mundane so that it can only be appreciated for being a simple, pretty relief if you had to sit through the torment before it." he looked at Daniel. "Does this make any sense?"
"Yeah", he said. "It's starting to, now that you say it like that."
"Why did you pick that part for today?" Erik asked. "We could have started with something easy, you know."
"I guess I just liked it", Daniel shrugged. That was a gross simplification. Dan had a lot of feelings and opinions about the music he was given, but not necessarily positive; on the day he first read through it, he went out and drank too much immediately afterward, swearing he'd give the papers back and never complicate his life like that again. And yet, it wouldn't leave him alone - he kept thinking about it, casting sideways looks at the bunch of papers on his desk, occasionally even whistling that strange, distorted,

haunting theme.
"Really? This part? This dissonant atrocity?" Erik raised his eyebrows behind the mask. Daniel couldn't see it, but he could hear it in his voice.
"I was called a dissonant atrocity more than once, so I guess that's why", Daniel grinned. "Okay, I get it. If you want it to sound ugly, I can do ugly. No muting or softening. I'll rattle everyone's goddamn bones from here to New Jersey. Let me try again." he held out his hands for the violin.
"That's, uh, a very accurate way of putting it", Erik mumbled in embarrassment as he passed it to him very slowly, careful to keep the distance between their fingers.
Daniel grabbed the violin and for whatever reason, decided he didn't care if Erik was there in the room with him. He laid all of the sheet music out on one of the desks, page by page, so he wouldn't have to flip pages as he played. He then took out the shoulder rest from under the violin, unscrewed a little screw, wiggled it a bit, and set the violin under his chin again at a different angle. Erik looked at him in confusion - that was not proper form - but Daniel paid him no mind. He relaxed his shoulders, then took his bow and bounced it against his hand a few times as he skimmed the music once more. "This won't be literal", he said more to himself than to Erik, who decided not to remind him of his presence. Daniel looked at the music the way he looked at things back when he was a little kid - he couldn't remember every detail of it, but he could suddenly see the main theme and had that unmistakable thought in the back of his head he hadn't had in years - oh, I know how to do this. I just have to not think about it too much. I know what this is about, it's simple - everything is simple. This is not about D minor or the staccato. This is about loneliness. This is bitter, and the color gray. Someone has forgotten, something unheard. A ghost's grudge against the world.
Daniel raised his bow. "Bitter, and the color gray", he mumbled. He started playing, letting out the horrendous screech of the first note as loud as he could - it shook and rattled his whole head and seeped through every wall of the building, reaching Heidel's office. Forgotten. Daniel's feet would sometimes start pacing in place as he got involved with what he was playing - it was an automatic movement, almost like a waltz, that helped him focus; all of his professors always hated it, calling it overly dramatic and unprofessional. But seeing as they were currently not here, and he was playing something overly dramatic and ugly, he didn't give a damn. His

head shook and he spun in place, lost in the moment, as he let the music that was lonely and ugly pour out unapologetically, without explaining or justifying what or why or how it was so ugly - it was simply what it was and for the first time in years, Daniel was also simply who he was. Daniel understood what was being said, and didn't feel the need to sugarcoat it as he played.
Erik sat behind him, and Daniel with his eyes closed would never see the shock that reflected that day in Erik's eyes.
"That was a lot more like what I had in mind", Erik whispered when Daniel was done, looking somewhere to his side. "Thank you, Mr. Jonsson. I knew you'd understand exactly what I needed for this part."
"I think I hear some ringing in my left ear", Daniel squinted and grabbed said ear. "Well, I have to admit one thing."
"Yes?" Erik seemed to look at him with some newfound respect.
"This is the most fun I've had in years", Daniel burst out laughing. "Oh, sir, the ladies and gentlemen of the New York elite won't like this symphony, not one bit! It'll make them far too uncomfortable; they're too used to sweeping their demons under the rug, they expect sadness to be expressed in neat little piano sonatas, not this maddening horror! They'll pout, frown, call it an affront to their sophisticated tastes and go back to their beautiful Manhattan villas where they can listen to Eine Kleine Nachtmusik!"
"It's not for them, anyway", Erik replied coldly, obviously offended. "And there's nothing wrong with Eine Kleine Nachtmusik, you're just too young to understand-" you anarchistic little brat.
"Oh, but I understand this! I love it!" Dan ran his fingers through his hair. "Where was this when I was wasting my youth practicing my scales and etudes? By God, this is pure emotion in the barest, basic sense of the word!" Daniel said with a sort of manic smile plastered across his face, his eyes twinkling. "How can something so infinitely disturbing sound so beautiful? Who did you sell your soul to? Whoever it was, they gave you your money's worth!"
"That would be enough, Mr. Jonsson. I'm glad you liked it, but we're not so close that you can assault my character like that." Erik raised his hand. Not that Daniel was in any way wrong he had managed to poke with insane precision the simple truth in the middle of the passage they'd been playing. It was the beginning of the first movement, a variation on the first improvisation he played for Alina on the violin Yana gave him, what

seemed like a hundred years ago - and it was toned down and polished a little. He felt a very confusing mixture of emotions: one part of him wanted to smack Daniel and shut him up for talking so casually about his private matters; the other wanted to hug him like a brother for understanding the composition and even calling it beautiful.
"Is the rest of it all like this?" Daniel set the violin down to shake his head. "I might lose my hearing if I have to do more than thirty minutes of this."
"N-no", Erik said with slight hesitation. "The rest is… quite different. Not so, um, offensive."
"I can't wait. I'm sure it won't be what I expect, either way." the change in Daniel's behavior was obvious - even if Erik had no doubt it would revert right back to normal soon - and his eyes seemed to have some new life in them. "When are we, uh, when am I supposed to start rehearsing with the orchestra?"
"I haven't decided yet", Erik scratched his temple, then had an idea.
"Do you have any suggestions? When would you like to start?"
"I don't know, whenever", Daniel shrugged. The question had caught him off guard - he didn't expect to be asked.
"Of course, the sooner the better", Erik leaned back in his seat. "You'll be more in tune with the orchestra if you spend more time with them - you'll be a better ensemble the more you listen to each other."
Daniel nodded.
"On the other hand", Erik tried to push a little further, "it might distract you if there's a whole lot of people listening to you before you've got your performance up to your standards. There is also the possibility that Maestro Heidel will be leading the orchestral rehearsals."
"Hmm. I know." the light in Daniel's eyes was dimming by the second.
"Why are you afraid of him?" Erik asked.
"I'm not", Daniel frowned, visibly offended.
Erik was starting to see a trend here. Luckily, it was a trend not hard for him to understand. "Maestro Heidel can sometimes be abrasive; he snaps at people without thinking. I've already seen it, and it annoys some people."
"At least he's direct about what he wants", Daniel shrugged.
"True." Erik paused.
"It's just annoying that he sometimes wants the impossible, and immediately", Daniel blurted out.
Erik blinked. "Oh."

Daniel shrugged. "Will, that be all for today, sir? I'll have to practice this by myself first before we go onto other parts, or it won't sound like anything again."
"I shouldn't have said that", Erik said slowly, looking very serious all of a sudden. "I- sometimes forget - ah, never mind. Mr. Jonsson - please, if you need to read through this by yourself, by all means. I'll see you again in a few days."
"Yes", Daniel packed his violin and bow, not looking at Erik as he walked out of the classroom after him. "I just wanted to ask, sir - what is it that you liked, about my style, or that you'd like me to do for this piece? Frankly, I never really thought I had much of a distinct style. Other than, apparently, being too loud to play in bars."
Erik paused, then shook his head solemnly. "I'm sorry. I'm not going to tell you that."
Daniel said nothing, but his brows frowned a little in frustration as he gripped the handle of his violin case.
Erik continued. "I'll show you techniques needed to play some parts that are counterintuitive, but other than that, I have no desire to tell you what I want, because then you'll just do that and nothing else. I'd like you to find your voice for what needs to be said in this symphony."
"Sir, I have to tell you, that doesn't sound promising to me at all", Daniel interrupted. "Yes, it's all good and romantic, but if I get here next time and you tell me I'm doing it all wrong but can't explain to me how we'll just be wasting everybody's time. It's easier if you just tell me."
"Yes, if there is something you'll be doing wrong, I'll make sure to tell you very concretely. But there is no way you'll be doing it all wrong. You're already doing it right, you just have a way ahead of you."
Daniel sighed.
"Mr. Jonsson, please grant me a modicum of your trust, because I've thought about all this well in advance. I'm not trying to play games with you. I do think you're on the right path."
"Alright. Sure", Daniel shrugged, biting the inside of his cheek. Erik decided to walk with him to the main exit - he had to go back inside for his things, but he also had something else to say and needed every second he had to compose his thoughts. As Daniel stopped at the entrance to say goodbye, he was surprised to see Erik standing a few feet behind him, looking very unsure for some reason.

"Mr. Jonsson", Erik said quietly. "I'd like just one more moment of your time."
Daniel turned, tightening his grip on his violin as he eyed him warily.
"I've seen the Academy, both outside and inside", Erik took a deep breath. "I know what it stands for - the whole… idea of tradition, artistry, perfection, greatness. I know that Maestro Heidel plays with people's fear of disappointing him, and I know that it works well for him, but I am not from his world. I am a nobody. I only have this score", he shook the papers nonchalantly, "and the only two things that I had, to write this symphony, were persistence and a wish - a need to be heard. That is all I ask of you - your persistence, and a wish to be heard. I'm aware of how difficult this composition is, and I'm aware of how demanding I can be. But whatever happens from now on, I'd like you to remember that the reason I wrote this symphony and why it was important enough for me to come here, was not perfection or greatness - it was just that wish. If you take those two things, persistence, and passion, and find them in yourself, I do not doubt in my mind that you will succeed. I never had any doubt at all." he gave the papers to Daniel, put his hands back in his pockets, and looked somewhere far behind Daniel, looking somewhat uneasy. "Well, that is all, Mr. Jonsson, I won't be keeping you any longer. I'll see you again in two days."
"Well, uh, thanks. It is a very beautiful composition", Daniel straightened a little, not looking reassured he looked even more intimidated than before, although for different reasons. "I'll do my best."
"No, that's not what I meant", Erik sighed, frustrated by his continuing failure to communicate with this man. "I know you will do your best, but it's not yet time for that. I'd just like you to try, just a little harder, than you did before. I know you'll do your best when the time is right, but you needn't think about that yet. Just a little more than before every day is what I'm asking."
"Huh", Daniel blinked, looking like he was just seeing Erik for the first time. "Alright. Yes." he nodded, turned, and walked outside into the street, his small frame molding into the crowd like there was never anything out of the ordinary about him at all.
"Wasn't that Mr. Jonsson?" asked Caroline from the reception, obviously reading something completely unrelated to work.
"Hm? Yes." Erik turned to her in surprise.

"Well, great. I was starting to get worried, sir", she cast him a quick look behind thick glasses, smiling a little.

Chapter 41: Crossroads

Summer was in full bloom, with August reaching its peak and rolling over to its second half - and, like many things reaching and passing their peak, it was slowly losing its former appeal. The days were still long and sunny, the flowers were blooming and animals lazing about without a care. But for the human residents of New York City, worries and decisions were sure to start as soon as September, and it was clearly in the minds of both the children and the adults that the little respite they were currently enjoying from real life would end abruptly and land them, face-first, exactly on the spot they were before whether they liked it or not.

The school was to start in early September, and while Alina was already used to what that meant it nevertheless came with plenty of stress and work to do - repeating final exams for children who didn't pass in June, organizing enrollment procedures for new students and generally preparing the materials she would need in the first month of her classes. It was hard to balance it all with her home life and the fact she'd done it all before only meant it wouldn't take up all of her time, only most of it. Her roommates, so to speak, gave their best to help her out as much as they could - but, this time around, they also had plenty on their minds.
If Alina was used to the madness that came with the start of the school year, Erik was decidedly not. Even though he had plenty of knowledge of how musical performances were organized, having watched many rehearsals and preparations before, he had absolutely no firsthand experience with it. All the little details Heidel constantly mentioned to him as "things that would have to be done, and soon", would have occurred to him before when he was watching Antoinette from afar, but now that he was on the inside of it and constantly overwhelmed by the sheer fact he had to walk, talk and act like a semi-passable illusion of a normal human being it was a miracle he even remembered to bring his sheet music to work, most of the time.

Amelija, seeing the change in her new family's behavior, was becoming actively aware of the fact she wouldn't stay here forever. Her first response to that thought was to push it down - it was not something she could change, so the best thing to do was probably not to think about it until the time came, and try to enjoy her stay as much as possible for as long as she could. Of course, it would have been easier if not for one tiny, nagging detail in the back of her head that made the thought resurface at least thirty thousand or so times in a single day, every time with equal gut-wrenching fear.

And what are you going to tell Jack?

Amelija initially had absolutely nothing special to tell Jack; she liked him, they had their fun, and now it was time for her to leave as she had promised her family to come back in the fall. It would be absolutely, terrifyingly selfish of her to simply stay here and send a "goodbye" to her family as nothing more than a note in Nikola's pocket - or so she saw it. It was even worse now that Alina was not coming back to have their parents go through the same loss without a closure for the second time; and even that aside, Amelija (unlike Alina) did have a life back home - one she enjoyed and one that promised a good future.

Even her favorite dresses and hats were back home.

It wasn't Amelija's first time away from home and certainly not her first time pursuing a fun, sweet little romance on her travels - she never made any promises and never left any strings attached, and the whole thing would usually end amicably for both. She'd never felt the need to leave her home, her family, and her future for some man she knew for a little while. Amelija thought herself smarter than that.

I suppose I am dumber than that after all.

It was even dumber to postpone any conversations and decisions until the last minute, which Amelija knew very well. It was inevitable, and she had a very hard time dealing with that fact but any decision she made would likely rip her heart in half - and the only thing she could do was probably just decide which half she would keep and which she would throw away.

"There is a conversation we've been putting off", Jack said, looking innocently at his nails. He'd come to pick up Amelija and take her out on another date; he'd started putting more and more effort into their dates as of late, and seeing as it happened to be Amelija's birthday that day, he came equipped with presents, flowers, and wearing his best non-work clothes.

The only things that stood out were his messy wavy hair, and his insistence to keep his hands casually in the pockets of his expensive-looking trousers as he strolled next to her.

"I'm aware. There's a very good reason I've been putting it off", Amelija replied, struggling to hold the paper bags with everything she had along with the flower bouquet - Jack tried to help, but as Amelija said, those were her presents and he was not going to take them out of her hands just yet.

"Of course", Jack grinned. "And, since I am, unlike you people, someone who likes to deal with problems, we will have to have that conversation. But", he shrugged, looking at her with the corners of his eyes wrinkling slightly, "we won't have it today. We deserve to have a little more of the carefree summer days. And you deserve a lovely birthday. For today, I will avoid this issue with all my might, for you. Well. What would you like to do?"
"I thought you had something planned", Amelija admitted as she sat down on the nearest park bench in the shade of a large oak. She put her things next to her and leaned back, sighing.
"No, I have some ideas, but since it's your birthday, I thought you might want to decide what you're in the mood for. I am really fine with anything." Amelija looked at him sideways.
"I had no idea what you would want and didn't want to risk making a mistake in this grave matter", Jack clarified. "But the day is long. We can stay here for a little while and think about it."
"It's not enough to just pretend everything is fine", Amelija sighed again. "What, are we going to sit here and try to think about something else? No, no, we need a distraction."
"I think you might be onto something, miss", Jack jokingly scratched his chin in deep thought.
"I think, to avoid unpleasant things that loom in the future, one must have the most fun possible while they still can", Amelija raised her eyebrow at him very seriously.
"And what do you consider good fun for your birthday?"
"Oh, I don't know. I can have fun in many ways. What do you usually do for fun?"

Jack coughed. "Mostly what you've already seen me do."
"Drinking a lot of beer and playing games while having very loud conversations?"
"Yes, exactly."
"Have you never been on a date before me?" Amelija laughed. "Or is that how you think ladies should be treated?"
"No, no, I'm well aware of how ladies should be treated and have been on many dates", Jack said jovially, not appearing confused or embarrassed by that question. "However, I find that when I spend the whole time wondering how a lady wants to be treated, that's not very fun to me, at least not for longer than a couple of weeks. You did ask me what I do for fun, not what I do to win over a woman."
"So, the point is that you're not trying to win me over?" Amelija's smile seemed to grow a little sharper.
"Exactly. I respect you too much to do that. I'm trying to get to know you, which is much harder when we're both acting out a play. Which is why I took you with me to do things I genuinely consider fun, but you have yet to tell me what you genuinely consider fun."
Amelija turned from him and looked ahead for a while. Several children were chasing after pigeons in the park, with their mothers and nannies running after them and shouting to come back and not soil their clothes.
"Well, you won't like this, but I find pretending to be genuinely fun."
Jack raised his eyebrows wordlessly.
"Yes, when I'm with Alina or Nikola we mostly do stupid, everyday things. We gossip and play cards. Sometimes sneak into places or drink together. But that's different. I do like going on old-fashioned dances and dates and pretending to be a princess, meeting new people and chit-chatting with them, trying to charm them and playing out some scenario from a romantic novel." she rolled her eyes. "You can call me shallow if you want. I don't care. I also like solving puzzles."
"Hmm." Jack bit his lip. "You're yourself a very interesting puzzle."
Amelija rolled her eyes.
"I'm sure you think I'm judging you right now, but I understand", Jack continued. "I haven't told you this, and I'll get in trouble if you tell anyone else, but long ago when I was a journalist, even before that, I had to lie and act my way into many shady organizations to do what I had to do. I was just so good at it, that they kept paying me for it, and after a while, it became

second nature - but I also grew sick of it. It's something I've learned to view as a necessary, but disgusting, part of survival myself. It's unlikely to change as long as I live here, but it feels like a breath of fresh air to just be myself sometimes." he paused for a second. "However, since it's your birthday - it would be nice, for a change, to pretend everything is going to be fine. I'd like to take you on one of those old-fashioned dates that you like so much, with dinner and wine and a play or concert. I think it would be fun for me to watch you have a good time. If you're up for it, of course."
Jack was more than happy to walk Amelija home after the dinner and concert, and Amelija was more than happy to allow him. As the effects of red wine started to subside a bit, their cheerful chit-chatting subsided as well to be replaced with thoughtful silence. Jack looked at his pocket watch - it was thirty minutes after midnight, which meant his vow of silence was officially over.

"You're going back home in September", Jack remarked gently, turning to Amelija.

Amelija kept walking in silence, thrown off-balance by the directness of that remark.
"I've been thinking about that, even though I tried not to", he continued. "It's a fact we'll have to face soon. At some point, this September, we'll have to say goodbye."
"Well, that's settled then", Amelija managed through tears that she barely kept contained.
"Nothing is settled", Jack shook his head. "Nothing. But I have no intention of keeping you here, no matter what I want. I have no claim over your future; we've made no promises."
"Isn't that very gentlemanly of you?" Amelija finally turned to him as tears spilled out of her eyes and across her cheeks. "Very polite, very fair, and I'm sure, very convenient." It wasn't like her to cry. It had never happened to her before. Amelija was a proud woman, and she would never cry over some man she just met a few months ago. Why was this happening to her?
Jack stared at her for a second, studying the tears streaming down her face. "It is fair. I would say it is. You value your independence, and I value your choices. I value you enough not to try and talk you into something you're not sure about. However", he raised his hand at Amelija opening her mouth

in obvious fury, "I'd like to hear it from you - that you wouldn't hate it very much if we stayed together."
Amelija closed her mouth.
"If you don't say anything, I won't say anything else either", Jack put his hand back in his pocket. "But, if you give me at least a little sign that this is more than just a fun little affair to you, and that you would like me with you again someday, you'll find out just how persistent I can be and just how far I can go to make that happen. I won't stop you from going home now - I won't snatch you from your family without a warning; I hope we can find a better solution to this. I have no idea how I'll make it happen, but I want you to know that I can wait a very, very long time and go very, very far for those I care about if I think there's any point in it. That is all I'll say for now. You have until September to say something."
Amelija said nothing, she just looked at him for a few more seconds, blinking more tears out of her eyes that streamed freely down her cheeks. Jack watched it happen, then took his right hand out of his pocket slowly. He lifted it to her cheek and gently wiped the tears out of the way.
"There will be enough time to cry", he whispered. "We have better things to do still."
Jack lowered his head and his messy brown locks fell forward and onto his face; Amelija noticed that from up close he seemed to have several tiny brown birthmarks around his right eye, or were they just freckles? She felt her heartbeat in her ears as he closed the distance between them and softly pressed his lips to hers.
Erik woke up, as usual, to see Alina sleeping peacefully in his arms. Her fingers were tangled up in his, her hair was tangled up around her face - everything seemed to be in its rightful place.
I wonder if I'll ever get used to this.
He looked around, and reminded himself as usual - that the door was locked, the window curtain was drawn and his mask was within reach if he needed it. Alina next to him looked peaceful. She told him she loved him just before she fell asleep.
I'm safe.
Alina stirred.
"There was something I was hoping to do today", he said looking at the ceiling. "If you don't mind getting up a little earlier."
"Hmmm?" Alina looked at him with half-opened eyes, confused. "Y-you're

going someplace?"
"We are, I mean if you'd like."
"There's a storm coming today", Alina remarked, peeking through the curtain just a little bit. "Heavy clouds. Air's all wrong. I told you last night." she let the curtain fall back and plopped back where she was laying, that is, straight onto him.
"Ow. I believe you, witch-woman. That's why I wanted to go earlier, so we can avoid it."
"Mmmmmsure." Alina stretched like a cat, rubbing the corners of her eyes. She then looked up at him and gently brushed his lips with her own.
"Where are you taking me?"
"Oh, nowhere special", Erik said, feeling slightly self-conscious. "I was just hoping to have some time with you, alone, before we both have too much work to do again." he shifted onto his side to face her; his thumb traced along her lower lip.
"Well, then I'll be right up", she smiled.
"No, actually, you're right. Another minute or two won't kill us."
"I like Oliver", she remarked. They walked along the shore in peace - it was still too early for tourists - and enjoyed the early sunlight that burst across the still-gray sky. "He sounds wonderful."
"You say that like it's a bad thing."
"No, no. I'm very happy for you, that you've found some musician friends. You seem very happy."
"In any case, I'm not working this week. Oliver asked for a week off before the autumn semester starts and we begin rehearsing for real - he wants to go on his yearly vacation with his wife. I gave Daniel the week off, too, I think he's starting to overthink himself into madness from all this. He's not used to working hard."

"Will you be very bored this week, then? Without someone to discuss music and art with?" she teased, but there was a definite hint of something serious underneath.

"Is that it, Alina?" he asked. "Are you scared you might not be enough for me?"
"It crossed my mind", Alina said very casually, looking to her other side. "That you might find a lot of people who understand you better than I do. I

just think - if you'll be constantly surrounded by beauty and artistry from now on, the ordinary might start to seem… ordinary."
"And you are incapable of beauty or artistry? That's what you think?" He laughed with a combination of shock and amusement.
"I'm capable of it, yes. But it's not central to my life. I'm just a teacher." Alina said with the same offhanded tone until she was stopped dead in her tracks by Erik who stepped right in front of her and took her face in his hands.
"My darling, my dearest, my lover" he breathed, "whatever made you think I didn't like the ordinary parts of you? After the things I've seen, what made you think I wouldn't cherish it all - ordinary days, ordinary life, ordinary love? As proficient as I am - and you are - at bringing chaos into our lives, I am not so far gone to not be able to stop and look around. And when I look around, the only thing I want to see is you next to me, always."
"...alright." Alina blushed, looking embarrassingly relieved. "I - I mean I love you too, I'm just a bit- surprised you said that. It would've been fine either way."
"If it makes you feel better", he added after a pause, "Oliver asked about you. He claims I talk about you a lot."
"You do?" she blinked. "You told him about me? Whatever for? What did you tell him?"
"I mostly don't remember things I tell him", he admitted. "He rambles a lot and I just… join in. I'm surprised he remembers it all."
"You're not getting away that easily! Tell me what you said about me!"
"Let me think", Erik scratched his chin, careful to smile only with the side of his mouth Alina couldn't see. "I may have told him you were loud and talkative."
"I knew it! You've been complaining about me to your... fancy music friend!" Alina exclaimed, poking his shoulder.
"No", he bit his lip, barely keeping it together now, "I said it because you fit right in with New Yorkers, and I'm very glad we're living somewhere you can be happy. Besides, don't forget, Oliver is loud and talkative as well, so I find it hard to believe he considers it a negative trait."
"Ah", Alina raised a suspicious eyebrow. "Nice save."
"I also may have told him, once or twice after Daniel drove me to the brink of my nerves, Alina would know how to handle this, and now he thinks you're some kind of angel."

"He's right. I am", Alina remarked dryly.
"You're not fooling me, witch", Erik finally looked at her, breaking into a grin. "But back to the point. I also told him you were lovely."
"Ugh, men", Alina rolled her eyes in pretend annoyance as her cheeks blushed. "Really? You did?"
"Well, he asked me", Erik shrugged. "I'm suspecting he was trying to make me uncomfortable. I think this is the sort of banter he has with people regularly."
Back in their home, after her birthday celebration, Amelija woke up later than usual to an empty, unexpectedly quiet house. She looked through the window - it was hard to tell what time it was exactly, she could only presume it was still forenoon. The sky outside was a murky, dark grey. The pent-up tension in the air for the past few weeks had decided to release itself through a truly majestic storm if the sky was any indication. She could feel the heavy, tiring pressure in the air. It would probably start by today's evening, maybe tomorrow morning. Until then, she would probably have to put up with this slight headache and sleepiness.
She got dressed and went out of her room - indeed, she was alone. Alina was nowhere to be seen or heard - the house was usually echoing with her soft singing in the mornings as she cooked or cleaned or watched Piotr, and being alone for the first time Amelija realized just how much the house and its mistress seemed to go hand in hand.
On the kitchen table, she found a few sandwiches, some fresh fruit, and a note.
We'll be back by evening (hopefully before the storm). Here's your breakfast, and I left you some coffee on the stove. If you go out, leave a note so I can pick you up if the storm comes.
Well, alright. Amelija could amuse herself for half a day; it wouldn't be a problem. It would be easier now that she knew people around here aside from Alina, Erik, and Yana - for example, some people with normal socializing habits who could keep her company, usually Jack and his friends - but she could always find them on her own. Alina did introduce her to a few of her acquaintances, so she would simply take a walk around the island and see if anyone she knew by name would be open to chatting and walking around. Amelija was always good at simply walking up to people and befriending them before they had a chance to think twice about it.
At least her mother wasn't around to tell her it wasn't exactly proper

behavior.
Chewing her sandwiches relaxed in her favorite chair, Amelija noticed something else in the room, on one of the shelves - it was a little package with another note, placed just so that she could easily see from the very spot she was sitting on. The wrapping paper was quite nice, with little pastel-colored stripes and white daisies, and she was fairly certain she would have noticed something so cute if it had been there before.
Curiously, she walked over to the shelf. The package was placed right there under her nose, exactly where she could grab it easily.
It wasn't right. Who knew who it was for - what if she was intruding on somebody's privacy?
Perhaps she could just open the note and see who it was for, then she'd leave it alone.
Reading the note somehow seemed even worse.
Amelija paced around the room, looking at the package, walking up to it then walking away again, biting her nails nervously. Curiosity was threatening to kill her. She never could stand just being around closed packages and secrets. Especially when something looked to be so temptingly placed for her.
Perhaps if she just opened the note and saw who it was for, then she wouldn't feel so bad. If it's a present for Alina from her darling, she won't snoop around anymore - first. After all, she was fairly certain he would be extremely upset at it, what with his weirdly stiff behavior with Alina whenever she was in the room - and second, because Alina would not resist telling her anyway if it turned out to be anything interesting.
She unfolded the note and stared for a moment in surprise. It wasn't Alina's handwriting; it was slightly messy and unusual - it was Erik's.
I don't know the customs of Croatian people but Alina told me you would like this.
Well, now she was positively going to die of curiosity if she didn't open it right away. She ripped the beautiful paper.
As she opened the box, she saw a faint glint of something sparkly. She put her hand inside the box and took out a little silver-colored metal figurine of a curled-up snake, with its head raised, its mouth open to reveal tiny sharp teeth and two brilliant-green pieces of glass as its eyes. The whole thing was no bigger than her index finger.
She set the snake on the table before her, looking at it. It was puzzling. The

snake looked back at her, its forked tongue flickering, intricately-carved scales on its raised back reflecting the light in the room.
Amelija looked around at the equally intricately-carved desk, the bookshelf, and the paper stars above her head. She wondered if she should be offended that her sister got everything carved and embroidered with flowers and stars, and she got a very beautiful and delicate viper.
"What a pretty, useless thing you are", she cooed out loud at the snake figurine, then as she finally realized the meaning of it, burst into laughter. The snake's green eyes seemed to flicker somewhat mischievously.
"We're not going to make it back home before the storm starts", Alina yelled against the strong wind. The waves crashed onto the sand and rocks of the beach around her, spraying her dress and face with saltwater.
Erik cursed.
"It's fine, it's nobody's fault. We couldn't have known", she held her hat and hair in place with her hands. "The rain's not a problem; it's not that cold. Even if we get soaked, we won't get sick."
"No, I don't care about the rain. I'm not too eager to get struck by lightning", he looked around. "You're right; we're too far from home. We're going to have to find some sort of shelter until it passes."
"Some house?"
"The village is far away. The caves are closer."
"What if they flood?"
Erik rubbed his temples. "I- yes, you're right. Some of them flood with the tide." he cursed again.
"Remember the one where we went when - uh, recently? That one is quite high up. I don't think it would get flooded."
"Can you climb up in this rain and wind? It's going to be slippery."
"We don't have much choice", Alina said. "It's that or running back to the village. Don't worry. It'll be fine."
Erik sighed, took her hand, and hurried her across the beach to the cave. He tried to remember if there was an easy path that would still be passable now that the tide was rising- but when they reached the entrance, all his hopes sunk.
"So I'll be climbing some rocks today", Alina concluded. "It's not the end of the world."
"I should have-"
"We should have predicted this. I don't intend to lose a single second

regretting how stupid we were. We have things to do." Alina took off her hat and tied it around her neck, then quickly took off her shoes and socks - they were dainty little things but would pose too much of a risk on the slippery rock. Erik kept his shoes and gloves as he looked at her - he, for one, was always dressed to climb, run or do anything needed to escape.
"Thank God I took my big bag today", Alina remarked as she stuffed her shoes in her bag, then tied the bag around her shoulder. "Let's go- lead the way."
"Absolutely not. You have to go first."
"Why?"
"So I can catch you if you slip."
"But -"
"I'll navigate you from below."
"Fine", Alina sighed. She grabbed the nearest rock with her bare hands and started to climb, finding support in the natural dents in the rock as she stepped onto the next one. It wasn't quite as steep as she feared it would be looking from below; the rocks were close to each other - the only danger was slipping and falling if one of them was wobbly or slippery. It shouldn't be this hard. The wind screamed and howled in her ears and kept sending her hair over her eyes, and the few meters of rocks she would normally be over in a few minutes now seemed like a mile.
"It's not that hard", she heard the voice from below. Erik was constantly two steps below her. "You've climbed much worse. It's just windy and loud, and that's distracting."
"It's -" Alina's foot slipped and scraped against the rock. She sighed, steadying herself, and kept climbing.
"You're almost there. Just a little more. I won't let you fall."
Alina climbed the remaining two feet of rock to the cave entrance, Erik following closely behind her. She sat down on the ground, took a deep breath in, and laughed. "This stupid island. Just when you think it's perfectly boring and family-friendly, there's still something left to surprise you."
"We, uh, do steer clear of the boring parts, sometimes too diligently-" Erik looked outside. Rain was starting to pour; thunder and lightning were still quite far away but approaching quickly. "I'm sorry. This was my fault - I didn't want to go home yet, I thought it would be fine, and I put you in danger."

"I'm not made of glass", Alina remarked, putting her socks back on. It was somewhat colder than it should reasonably be. "We've done plenty of things like this, except this time it was a little more- spontaneous." she let down her hair and squeezed out the raindrops. Erik noticed she'd started shivering. It wasn't cold at all, but the damp air, rain, and wind were not helping.
"Come here", he sat and leaned against the cave wall, gesturing for her to join him.
Alina scooted over and nested comfortably next to him, leaning her head on his chest as he put his arms around her. The storm outside would probably subside in an hour or two, Erik thought, and they would be able to go back. The steady, constant hum of the rain lulled them both into a sort of trance, and they sat for a while without saying anything. Alina seemed to be dozing off, her breathing slowing down as she leaned into him. Erik appreciated the moment, he truly did - but his restless mind couldn't help it at times, and the things that kept bothering him, thoughts that probed the inside of his brain would always seem to find their way out of his mouth, however long it took when he was around her.
The thunder cracked somewhere in the distance as Erik whispered, "I have nothing to give you."
He paused. "I seem to have some money now, but you don't appear to care about that. It would be easier if you cared about something so simple; I could simply get it for you and that would be it. I'd have been alright with it, you know. I would have settled for so much less. And now that I got everything, I feel as though I have nothing to give back."
Alina made no sound; she simply kept breathing deeply and leaned on his shoulder with her eyes closed. The image of serenity. She didn't appear to have heard him at all.
"I have myself, of course, and as ridiculous as it is that's what seems to be making you happy, but I'm already yours. Nothing will ever change that, no human or Godly law, no condition or tradition, no circumstance or distraction. I cannot be yours any more than I already am. It was decided the moment I met you, I just wasn't aware of it yet. It will be the last thing I'm aware of before I die, how much I love you."
Was he imagining it, or was Alina's breathing growing quicker? He must have been imagining it.
"You don't seem to care about tradition that much either; I doubt any sense of propriety would ever steer you in any direction where your own heart

wouldn't guide you. I suppose that's kind of comforting, even if it's terrifying."
He was imagining it. Not only was Alina not stirring, but she seemed to be sleeping so deeply that even her breathing barely made any sound. Her chest barely moved.
"I don't care about any of those things either. It horrifies me that I might - I know what the world is like, you know, even if I haven't seen that much of it aside from what I saw through the bars of a cage. It horrifies me I might put someone else in a cage, whether it is a gilded cage or not. I'd like to be someone's wings. It's all I ever wanted. I never thought it was meant for me. I still don't think any of this was meant for me. I feel like every day with you is trickery, stolen out of some sleeping god's vault. I dread the day you might decide you don't want me anymore - even if every grain of my body tells me it would be the right decision - but I can't live with myself if I take that decision from you."
He kept silent for a few minutes, deep in thought. The rain poured outside, and the hypnotic sound seemed to blur the difference between "now" and "eternity". Erik swallowed.
"I'd still like to marry you, even though I know you probably don't want to. If you wanted marriage, you'd have done it by now. I - I don't mind it, you know. It does bother me somewhat, but I don't mind it. I would have settled for so, so, so much less. But I'd like to - I'd like to, I don't know, I don't care about churches or laws or witnesses. I'd just like to say the words to you and hear them said to me. I don't know why. I wish I could know it's what you want, but I will never be sure I didn't accidentally trick you somehow."
"You could start by telling me these things when you don't think I'm asleep", he heard a soft reply from his shoulder.
Erik jolted back as if struck by a flash of literal lightning. Alina narrowed her eyes at him.
"You're-"
"Yes."
"How long?"
"The whole time."
"Why didn't you tell me-" Erik started raising his voice, embarrassment threatening to turn into anger.
Alina looked at him with calm, cold eyes. "Was I supposed to know I was not meant to hear it? By the time I realized it, it was too late. Or did you

expect me to stop you? Do you realize how you're sounding right now?"
"You were eavesdropping-"
"On my goddamn marriage proposal!" Alina hissed, crossing her arms. "And, yes, I'm sorry for embarrassing you! I'm also sorry for myself because I think I'm worthy of hearing it directed at my awake and conscious person!"
"I don't want you to hear my ramblings-" at least now he was too confused to discern if he was angry, annoyed, or embarrassed.
"Quiet!" Alina snapped in a tone he hadn't heard from her before. "Oh, I am so angry with you right now!"
Erik blinked once, twice, then raised his hands in confused annoyance. "Why, exactly? None of this was meant for you to hear, so you're not obligated by any of it. You don't even have to react."
Alina looked like fumes might soon start coming out of her ears. "I can't believe I have to explain this to you, but fine. I'm angry at you because I wanted to hear it, and I wanted to react, and I didn't want to - steal this moment from you, I wanted it to be meant for me! And now it's not! Fine, you know what, I won't react! You can save your most precious moments for when I'm asleep if you'd like, even if I'd die to hear something like that from you. But if you'd like to marry me, the only way you'll get a response is if you ask me to my face, you coward!"
Erik looked to be somewhere halfway to panic, staring at her motionless with his eyes widely open. Alina kept silent, although she did have quite a few more things to say.
"I think I've just explained the problem -" he started, waving his hand in hope all that nervous energy would get conducted out of his body somehow.
"Yes", Alina nodded coldly. "And it's your problem, for you to resolve. Has it ever occurred to you I also don't want to be the one pressuring someone?"
It had not occurred to him, ever, but it was occurring to him at this very moment. Alina could see it as he stood petrified and blinked once through the mask, and she gave her absolute best not to roll her eyes.
"We're not in a hurry", she added slowly.
He nodded.
Alina scratched her head, looking away. "That - that was beautiful, nevertheless. It was the most beautiful thing anyone has ever said to me. I wish I hadn't - stolen that moment from you. I didn't mean to."
Erik wanted to point out that he was more likely the one who ruined it, but

he bit his lip and stopped himself on time. She wanted to hear something different from him for a change, instead of self-deprecating cowardice. Didn't she say so just now?
"I", he started, pulling every word out very slowly and quietly, staring at his hands. "I would have said all of it to you eventually. I mean every word of it."
Alina nodded, following his gaze. "I've always liked your hands. When we met you always kept them hidden in gloves or pockets."
They're objectively less horrible than the rest, yes, he barely managed to avoid saying. "Thank you, I suppose?"
"I love you", she said with sudden tenderness and sincerity that knocked the air out of his lungs. "You're everything to me, and I love everything about you. But how can I possibly show that if you're always hidden?"
"I'm not." he swallowed. I'm horrifyingly exposed, to be honest. "I'm doing my best."
"I understand," she said quietly.
"Perhaps I could do a little more", he added.
Alina smiled at him, then at the storm outside, then at him again. "When I met you, I felt something I had never felt before. For the first time in my life, I felt understood. I can't quite explain it - it gave me so much more confidence when I was around you, even if I didn't understand you at all, that I felt like you understood me. I am yours, you know. I was always just my own - and there was a certain strength it gave me - but now I'm also yours, and I'm stronger. It is more like a wind in your back - or wings if you will - and nothing like being in a gilded cage, you know. I know you think I'm just saying what you want to hear, but it's true, I do feel like… oh, never mind." she chuckled a little bit, blushing and smiling with embarrassment. Erik could remember the first time he saw her like that, cheeks red and voice growing frantic as if saying the right words could mend all of the world's wounds and it was her failure that she couldn't find them.
"An eternity of it sounds… sort of lovely, to be honest. But that's all I'm saying for n-" she tried again, only to be interrupted by a pair of hands cupping her face and a pair of lips being pressed to hers.
"You can stop talking", he said gently, brushing his lips over her cheek. "I understood you the first time."
"Well, see, that's exactly what I meant -"
"My dear, beautiful, endless torrent of words", he ran his fingers through

her hair, "my darling sweetheart, please do shut up. I love you. I - will - always love you, no matter what you say."
"You're right. We have better things to do than talk right now."
Amelija paced around the little living room, slightly worried. They said they'd be home before the storm. Now it was quite obviously during-the-storm-o'clock, and Amelija had no idea how long these storms would normally last in this part of the world. She didn't like being alone during thunderstorms - but she could endure it, seeing as she was inside. She was more concerned about Alina who was possibly still outside, caught in the midst of it and unable to come back.
She finally saw them after the rain settled into a steady, rhythmical hum. As she looked nervously out through the window, she saw two figures in the distance- a very tall man wrapped his jacket around the woman's shoulders; completely unnecessary seeing as it wasn't cold now that the wind had stopped - as they ran through the muddy street, skipping over the puddles. Alina slipped and laughed, barely keeping her balance as her foot splashed directly into a puddle, which Erik didn't think very funny as he grabbed her hand and led her more carefully to the house. Amelija sighed.
The world is always moving on, all you can do is try to adapt.

Chapter 42: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

To my dearest cousin(s),

I'll be here around September 15th-20th. Amelija, pack your bags and tie up your loose ends I suppose because I have no desire to linger in New York for too long. I'd like to get across the stupid ocean before it gets properly cold. Alina, pack your bags if you'd like to come, but otherwise, clean your house and tell your lover I'm coming to meet you both. No, I won't politely wait for an invitation. The entirety of Canada's wildlife couldn't stop my scientific curiosity and neither can you; I'd dare say you have fewer bears at your disposal. I'm bringing gifts, too.
Nikola
Daniel usually exited the classroom with haste as soon as Erik announced that he was free to do so and hurried for the roof to have a cigarette. His breaks were never very long, and he was quite motivated to use every second of them. He'd just put on his jacket, tapped the pockets to see his cigarettes and matches in place, and was getting ready to leave- he opened his mouth to announce he'd be back in ten minutes, more or less, when he looked at Erik a little more closely than usual, for whatever reason.
Erik had already dismissed Daniel and was now bent over his nearly-finished symphony, or at least the parts of it he hadn't already forbidden himself from touching anymore, obsessing over minute differences that no sane person could hear. The intense frown in the lines around his eyes was visible even though they were partially obstructed by the mask; his gloved hand was frantically writing notes that were supposed to make it easier for Daniel after he was left to practice alone at home (and occasionally, they did make it easier. Sometimes, though, they'd confuse Daniel to the point where he'd just ignore them completely and do whatever he felt like, which, surprisingly, worked just as well). With his body nervously cramped and his

shoulders tense, and his free hand absentmindedly pulling at some strand of hair on his temple, Erik looked like a maestro and more like a young student preparing for a particularly difficult exam, knowing that a single stupid answer might get him a good shouting from a particularly nasty old professor.
Daniel watched him for a second before he decided. Crossing the room in a few light steps, he opened the window wide and sat on the windowsill, rolling a cigarette. Daniel did not particularly like cigarettes, nor did he smoke that often. However, he found that they were a good excuse for making someone stop nagging him and shut up about music for a few minutes.
"Do you mind?" he asked, already lighting it.
"Huh?" Erik's head shot up; he hadn't noticed that Daniel never actually left.
"No, I don't care. But Heidel might."
"Heidel smokes more in one day than I ever have. I doubt it." Daniel rambled as the cigarette in his mouth moved with his talking. "He's very disciplined about it, doesn't want students to know, but sometimes you can still smell tobacco on his clothing, although faintly."
"I can't", Erik replied, turning back to his work. His shoulders clenched once again as if expecting some unknown punishment. "And anyway, if he gives me trouble about it, you're going back on the roof."
"Fair", Daniel said. Erik's cold, blunt tone and lack of politeness that once drove fear into Daniel's very bones now seemed to carry a somewhat different meaning.
"What are you working on?" Daniel asked, looking at the city through the open window.
"I'm writing you some notes. Things we talked about today, so you don't forget them when you're rehearsing at home." Erik's hand faltered, hovering over his papers as if he suddenly remembered something. "Don't take it as criticism. You're doing very well. I'm trying to help."
"Am I?" Daniel asked, still looking at the window. "Why are you so stressed all the time, then? It can't be Oliver, and the orchestra hasn't even started rehearsals yet."
Erik looked up again, this time looking at Daniel. "Yes, you're driving me insane, if that's what you're asking."
"Ah."
"That's not a criticism, either. It's just who I am." he paused. "I- I am not

used to working with other people."
"I think it's who I am, too", Daniel smiled apologetically. "I'd like to ask something, but don't get offended-"
"If it's about the mask, you're fired." Erik's voice didn't even falter, but the way his eyes instantly met Daniel's, pinning him to the spot, told Daniel he would be not only fired but promptly thrown out of the same window he was currently smoking on.
"No, I was curious, if I may ask, do you always work when I leave for a smoke? Do you just keep on working until I'm back?"
"Yes."
"And why do you write everything down? I mean, my memory is pretty good. You don't have to do that."
"I'm starting to wonder about that, myself", Erik said, crossing his arms and looking at his notes. "The more I write down, the more you simply disregard all of my notes and do something of your own accord. Perhaps I'm wasting my time."
"Um", oops, "but if you say I'm doing fine, surely it can't be that bad?"
"It's not bad at all. Still, I'll sleep better when I know I've done everything I can. "
"Sometimes… the explanations… make it less clear", Daniel said, looking into his cigarette.
Erik kept looking at him, saying nothing.
"When we met, you told me you wanted me to find my style. Have I done something wrong?"
"No."
"And now you want to control every minute detail of every note. How come?"
Erik thought for another moment, then spoke. "This time last year I was working on a completely different project- I had some trouble later on because I don't have the habit of communicating to people which things are important to me and why, or why I wrote the things I wrote the way I wrote them." He sighed. "I'm not keen on repeating my mistakes; I prefer to make each one only once. In any case- well, in your case, I suppose I want you to understand exactly what I meant when I wrote this, and then say it with your voice. So it's both, in a way."
"So, you want me to capture the gist of what all this means to you- by explaining it very thoroughly? I'm afraid that wouldn't work - I've never

liked long explanations and copious details. I get lost in them; lose sight of what's important."
"How else would you have me do it, Mr. Jonsson?"
"I'll think about that when my mandatory agreed-upon break is over. Who's that woman, Alina?" Daniel switched the subject seamlessly. "Is she your wife?"
"No. Not yet, at least. Does it matter?" Erik's voice was dangerously close to hissing now.
"I'm… sorry? I'm just making conversation." Daniel had secretly already asked Oliver who the woman at Erik's house was weeks ago, and Oliver had told him without reservation.
Erik considered it for a bit. "My fiancée."
"That's sweet. Congratulations." Daniel rolled another, thinner, cigarette. "How come you decided to be a musician, of all things? Did you wake up one day and decide, hey, I'm bored, I'm going to learn violin by myself, and then I'm going to start writing music? And then you kept at it forever? How does that even work?"
"More or less exactly as you described it", Erik put down his pencil, seemingly relaxing just a tiny bit. "I knew I had some talent, and a good ear, I could play a little bit of piano and read- read sheet music. Everything else was just… exactly as you said: I practiced day and night, read as many books as I could find, and watched other musicians. Except I didn't decide to start, so much as I was drawn to it. I couldn't do it."
"That's insane. I can't believe it", Daniel shook his head. "It's amazing."
"Why did you stop?" Erik asked with some new spark in his eyes, now that questions were allowed.
"I never really stopped? I've been working as a violinist this whole time."
"Technically, yes. But surely you know what I mean."
"Huh", Daniel furrowed his brow. They'd been rehearsing for so long that the sun was starting to set on the horizon behind him, casting his head and small shoulders in a golden halo of light. They were still nowhere near done, probably, but it didn't matter- Daniel would have to go to work soon anyway. "Back when I was a kid, music was- hell, I don't know how to explain it. Music was not something I did, it was something I was. It was just sound, just a game, just something happening constantly somewhere in my mind, on a completely intuitive level. When others- my parents, bless them and their ambitions, and my teachers- realized I was talented, they

were so eager to ruin it. They put all these rules and notes and stuff into my head, and- now I understood music the way they wanted me to, but it was just so much… worse, you know? I read music instead of hearing it, I reproduced it instead of making it. It's like, from swimming in an ocean I ended up in a little box with iron bars. Everything had its rightful place. Everything had a name. Everything was either right or wrong. And I stopped hearing it the way I heard it as a kid. So… I didn't see any point in it anymore, either. And now... I have to learn to hear it again. Now I have these two ways of hearing and playing music, constantly battling each other in my head." Daniel shook his head. "I can recall myself, as a kid, laughing whenever I found a new way to make noise. And then I hear my professors telling me, Daniel, please stop messing around and give me a proper staccato, and by God, please stop hopping around while you play."
"You can keep moving around", Erik hurried. "It doesn't matter. As long as it doesn't distract you."
"Distract me? On the contrary. It's damn torture to keep still. I get so jittery when I play, I might jump out of my skin if I have to keep that stiff damned posture."
"Well, I am not an academic, and I honestly don't care about presentation", Erik shrugged.
"Heidel will care", Daniel remarked.
"Heidel will probably care", Erik rubbed his temples. "I will try to reason with him. He has already been made aware that I don't operate by the same rules as he does. And yet, he let me do this."
"You'd fight to let me embarrass you on the stage but not to let me smoke in your own office?" Daniel gestured at the little room around them. Perhaps "office" was generous. It was a tiny walled-off part of a former classroom that they simply told other people to not go into. Erik put some of his things in the desk drawers, and that was that. He politely and tentatively asked if they had any spare upright pianos he could use in the tiny room, and the next day he was there, the old one from the basement was already waiting for him inside (and properly tuned, too). The students who brought and tuned the piano at Heidel's request each found a little gift on their desks the next day, notably without any message or even the sender's name.
"If I annoy him too much by arguing about every little thing, I won't be as credible when I argue about the important things. I don't care in the slightest about your smoking habit. If Heidel demanded you stop altogether

immediately, I'd not lift a finger to help you."
"And you care about me doing my own thing?" Daniel's break was long over, and Erik knew it; however this uncharacteristic chattiness could be used to break at least a tiny bit into Daniel's annoyingly hard shell and make him cooperate at least a little, so he allowed it.
"I do", he replied. "When I started playing music, I was also simply hearing it, living it, making it. It was all trial-and-error, intuition, and freedom. My mother- well, adopted mother, to be precise- let me do as I pleased and tried to help if she could. I'm starting to think the reason you might be the right soloist for this exact job is that in the beginning, you had a similar path. I'd be a fool to take it from you now."
"You were adopted?" Daniel tilted his head, obviously curious.
"I can't believe how much easier it is to say things like these in English", Erik shook his head in amusement. "I could never say it in French; I doubt I would find the words even if I wanted to. I pity people who only speak their mother tongue. Everything you say must be very personal to you."
Daniel looked at him with lips pursed in a sort of annoyed grimace, forgetting about his cigarette until the ashes started falling around him, carried by the wind.
"Yes, I'm a fool to take that freedom from you", Erik concluded, taking his pencil out again and crossing out his notes with long, decisive strokes. "Not anymore. You're an adult, and ready to take this into your own hands. I will be here every day from three to five - I'll be with Oliver after five - if you need anything, come by whenever you want. But I won't make you come regularly anymore if you don't want or need to."
"And if I start slacking off?" Daniel teased.
"Then you will be fired", Erik replied matter-of-factly. "As anyone else would. But I doubt that will happen. I'll see you some time by the end of this week, I presume?" he passed Daniel his sheet music, nodding politely. "It's probably time for you to go to work- I won't keep you any longer. It was nice talking to you, Daniel."
"Likewise", Daniel packed up his things, hardly believing his luck.
As Daniel exited the building considering where he might grab a quick dinner before he was off to work, Erik slowly made his way to greet Oliver. He knew Daniel's newfound friendliness would not last long - Daniel Jonsson was so elusive that Erik couldn't find a single person in New York who knew him well, or any meaningful piece of information about him that

wouldn't require him to break into his apartment or do something equally morally reprehensible. People, it seemed, tended to think they knew or understood Daniel very well, and yet, at every possible chance, he seemed more than eager to disappoint them and vanish into thin air, burning bridges behind him seemingly on a whim. Erik was not so naive to think a person like that would be so easily reached.

Or maybe I'm too cynical.

(Daniel didn't come again by the end of the week - it was a matter of principle, and Erik never mentioned it. But on Monday he came at three o'clock sharp, punctual, ready, with a glint in his eye that wasn't there before.)

Alina was swamped with work.

She was always swamped with work this time of the year, so it wasn't a problem. The school was starting, kids had to be re-introduced to the concept of learning and behaving after months of gleefully forgetting how to do both. Paperwork had to be done, schedules had to be made, and all the miscellaneous work that all educational workers did (and usually hated) was usually due yesterday; Alina could swim quite well in the sudden flood of stress and minuscule details, but that didn't mean she liked it.

Alina's additional workload this year had a surprisingly optimistic and pleasant addition - she was in charge of writing letters of recommendation for students who wished to continue their education further; moreover, those immigrant children who already knew English well enough or excelled at a certain subject enough that they could transfer to more difficult, specialized schools. Usually, most of those letters would be done by July, but seeing as Alina's paperwork had only arrived recently, she would have to make do and use Dowling's influence (and her own, newly-acquired influence that came with her new teaching license) to squeeze out some empty spots in the schools her students wished to go to. The last thing she had to do was less of a timebomb; Alina had several students who would also require scholarships for various reasons, and it was her job to find ones that they could qualify for and help them apply for said scholarships (as kids are notoriously bad at giving paperwork to their parents to sign, and even worse about returning or submitting it promptly to proper authorities).

She was nearly finished, cheerful at the thought of going home to her family, when a knock sounded at her door. Curbing her disappointment,

Alina put on a friendly face and asked, "Come in?"
The door opened slowly, shyly. Behind it stood Anna Preston - Walter's mother - and entered hesitantly after Alina's invite, sitting down on the chair across Alina. The woman was still somewhat uneasy every time she saw Alina, but less so - and after Walter had been tutored all summer by Amelija, who sometimes even came by to say hello to his family, she'd grown quite bolder and friendlier with them.
It was quite alarming to Alina how now had that look about her again - frightened, quiet as if expecting a swift and severe punishment.
Alina realized quickly, even as she struggled to exchange niceties with the woman, that she was about to hear something terrible.
"Walter might not come back", said Anna Preston. "For this year, at least."
Alina's blood boiled in her veins, and even though she kept her face perfectly still it still seemed that the woman caught something in the single second she took before responding.
"Alright, Mrs. Preston. Thank you for telling me. May I ask what prompted this decision?" she tilted her head slightly to the side, her voice low.
"He's going to start working", Mrs. Preston said. "Hank Jr. and Samuel both started working at Walter's age, and now it's fair that he does too - besides, with the two little ones, we need all the help we can get. It's good for him, he's a healthy young man and he needs discipline. He'll grow up better working, than with his nose stuck in books." the little woman recited it like a poem.
Alina took a second too long to respond, but it was the best she could do.
"I- I see, Mrs. Preston. Well, as long as it's in Walter's best interest, I have no problem with it. If it helps him, that's great! Tell him I wish him all the best." she said in the fewest words she could manage, having decided it was best if she didn't open her mouth too much. God knows what might come out, such for example, her opinions.
"Thank you, Miss", Mrs. Preston said, slightly surprised. "I do hope- think it'll be good for him. It'll get him closer to his brothers, and his father."
Alina smiled sweetly.
"And, uh, if we- if our situation gets better- we might send him back in a year or two. Would it be possible to continue his education later? Where did he leave off? Or will he be too old?"
"Perhaps he could. If I'm still here by the time he comes back, I'll do my

best to make it happen." Alina said with equal cordial sweetness, which made the woman more than a little uneasy.
It took about fifteen more minutes of niceties and Alina trying her best to express kindness and sympathy for the woman, for Mrs. Preston to be convinced that her request would go without a catastrophic explosion. Alina was, meanwhile, going through her hell - torn between contempt for a woman who couldn't make herself protect her own life and was willingly and chronically risking her children's lives; and sincere sympathy for the woman currently cowering before her as she probably cowered before everyone in her life who showed even a little bit of backbone. Alina felt a sort of disgust-by-proxy to be put in the category of people this woman considered "potentially dangerous", even though there was nothing she could do about it; all the self-control and kindness in the world would not bend her spine or make her voice meek or her eyes shyly avoiding other people's gaze as Mrs. Preston was currently doing in front of her. Mrs. Preston was entirely right to think she was potentially dangerous, but for completely wrong reasons.1
Once Mrs. Preston finally left, Alina closed the door after her, and after a moment's hesitation locked it.
She slid her back down the door, sat on the floor, and cried soundlessly until she could no longer think. Then she straightened up, fixed her hair, splashed her face with cold water, and left the school with her back straight as if nothing at all had happened.
"Miss Alina", she heard someone calling after her. Alina turned, doing her best to compose herself and make her face look vaguely normal. Sam Preston, having spent his entire 17-year-old life tuned into others' feelings and the possibility of them snapping suddenly, didn't miss how upset she looked.
"Miss, I'm sorry to bother you when you're off work", he took off his hat as he hastily apologized. "It's just, well- I'd like to speak with you if you don't mind. About Walter."
"I've already spoken to your mother", Alina said. "She told me he's not coming back."
"I know, yes, I knew she'd come", Samuel nodded. "That's- that's why I'm here."
"I see", Alina straightened and coaxed her miserable-looking face into forming a polite expression.

Samuel was silent for a moment, then burst out. "Please, please don't blame Walt for not coming back- it's, it's not his fault. I mean, I hope something still changes and he can come back to school - but please don't blame him, he loved your lessons and he's so grateful to Miss Amelija for coming to teach him. It's really… not that he wanted to start working right away. I know he's proud and stubborn but no matter what he says, he's just trying to make himself feel better. I know him and I know he wants to come back, so, I know how much effort you and Miss Amelija put into his lessons- I don't want you to feel like we're not grateful for it."

"Calm down, honey", Alina touched Samuel's shoulder gently, upset by that torrent of words. "I'm not blaming Walter for anything. We wanted to do it, he- you- don't owe us anything. And even if he chose by himself to abandon school, it's fine if he wanted it." It was a lie, really- Alina was very much hurt and disappointed, and she didn't consider a thirteen-year-old child mature enough to make important life choices; however, looking at Samuel's sincere guilt and anguish she felt a need to reassure him just a little. Sam, it seemed, had very little control over what was going on in his family, but seemed to carry all the guilt for everything that went wrong.

"He didn't, really", Sam said miserably, clutching his postboy hat. "Hank and I- my brother Hank, not dad- we spent all of the last summer with Walt, and he looked really happy about his lessons, he was so full of energy. Kept bragging about stupid boring math, but he was so happy we pretended to understand what he was on about. I think he's really unhappy about it all it's sometimes hard to tell, he gets so defensive when you ask him anything. But he looks really unhappy to me."

"I'm sorry, dear. If there's something I can do to help, just tell me."

"I don't know", Sam sighed. "Hank already tried everything. He told Dad he thinks Walter should continue with school, that we'll all have better lives if he goes to college, that he can get a scholarship- nothing works. I honestly wish Hank was in charge of Walter, he understands him so much better. But it is what it is."

"I agree", Alina said, looking away in hopes that Samuel wouldn't notice the fury that threatened to overcome her. "You kids are good people. Stick with each other, always. You'll need it."

It was as innocent a remark as she could think of, but Samuel burst out into a desperate rant. "I know what you must think- Hank and I should just take our brothers and sister and all runaway and protect them from our dad, but I

can't- I don't know how to do that! It's not that simple!"
"Honey!" Alina pointed a strict finger at him. "I said no such thing. I'm not blaming you for any of this."
"Did you know that Hank used to think all families were like ours?" Samuel rambled on. "Dad's parents are just like him, both of them- and mom's folks are too; she's not, but she thinks it's normal! And Hank, he started working early and always minded his business, never had friends. He used to fight back against dad, thinking it was normal - and until I grew old enough to ask other kids if their parents are also like ours, we all thought it was normal!" Samuel took in a breath. "They're not, are they? They didn't lie to me?"
"No, no. They're mostly really not like that", Alina reluctantly agreed, wondering where this was going.
"Hank didn't believe me at first, he was afraid he'd be just like Dad when he grew up - but I somehow managed to convince them all. And now I can't do anything! Neither of us can! Dad has the final word! Even if I took them all and ran away, the law would be on his side!"
"Law hasn't had its say in this matter yet, darling", Alina's voice was cold and sharp as ice. "We didn't have much leverage before or enough information. But I know more now, and if at least one of you is willing to stand by what you said, a lot of things could change."
"I-" Samuel finally shut his mouth. "I- do you mean...?"
"You know exactly what I mean, honey, and how seriously I mean it. Think about it over time. I need witnesses, not rumors. Do you understand me?" her eyes flashed strictly at him.
"I- do, miss." Sam nodded. "I'll tell Hank. We'll tell you what we decide."
"Alright, Sam. Thank you.", she nodded. "I have to go home now. I'll see you."
"See you, Miss", Samuel said politely, putting his hat back on and walking away with his shoulders slumped by some unimaginably heavy burden.
If they do agree to go against their father, Alina mused as she sped back home, it might take years for them to gather the courage. Hopefully, it won't be too late for Walter back then.
Is this the best I can offer them? She thought as her eyes welled up with tears again. She had no answer to that.
When Alina came home, she found (not to her great surprise) Jack there as well as Erik and Amelija; Jack and Amelija seemed to have some heated

discussion of their own which Erik ignored, blissfully entranced in his work. Still, when Alina came, obviously distraught, they all left what they were doing and turned to her.
"What is it?" Erik asked from his room through the open door.
"Nothing", she tried feebly.
He blinked. "I'm not that naive. Do you want to go and talk elsewhere?"
Alina took out a chair and tumbled into it like a tower of cards across Jack and Amelija, burying her face in her hands. She told them, more or less, what happened; she took out some parts about the talk she had with Samuel. Her head still felt burning hot, and she couldn't muster up the kind of cold, calculated fury needed to think about any plans for the future.
"I get it", Jack said, shaking his head. "Damn it, I get it. I get them. It's unfair, yes - but it was all happening so fast. It was too fast, too drastic of a change - suddenly Walter had good grades, then he was all over you like you were his parents, then he started getting tutored by Amelija - it was all too soon, and they got scared. They think you're going to take him away from them."
"I would take him away from them in a second if I could", Alina's voice cut like an icicle. Her face was cold; her eyes flashed with hatred. "They have good intuition, at least."
"You can't", Jack pointed a warning finger at her. "Don't do anything stupid. The law is on their side, still- he belongs to his parents, and not you, and nobody will care that you'd be a better parent to him. Don't do anything stupid until we've had time to think about this. For now, they have the last word."
"I understand." Alina slowly got up and started rummaging through her kitchen drawers without another word. Jack looked at Erik in confusion, taken by the apparent ease with which she took the news.
Erik was not so optimistic, and when the sound of the first plate crashing echoed loudly across the room, he was thankfully prepared. He hurried to the kitchen; Jack and Amelija moved back.
Alina stood, a handful of plates under her right arm, as she took out one by one with her left and threw them, full force, against the wall furthest from Erik.
"Children", she said calmly, throwing another plate with each following word, "Are. People. Not. Property."
"Legally", Jack said very slowly, "you are, in fact, wrong. He belongs to his

parents." This seemed to shake her out of her apparent trance, and as she turned around to face him Erik managed to quickly take the rest of the plates from her on time; he didn't think she'd ever aim them at Jack, but the crashing plates wracked his nerves a little too much.
"He belongs to himself!" Alina shouted, waving her hands around her in fury. "He is not some puppet to be controlled until he's an adult! Why do you think these things happen? Generations after generations of bitter old people drag their children down to mud with them, only to continue the cycle again! I, I can't let that-" She stopped, putting a hand to her mouth. She shut her eyes tight, trying to compose herself. Erik watched silently, having no idea how to help; he put his hand on her shoulder but she didn't seem to notice. It was obvious this might simply be one of those situations one could do nothing about; Erik could recognize it, and Jack could recognize it, both having seen those stories countless times and learning to deal with them. The only thing they could do was accept it and try to move on with their lives.
But Alina, even after all these years of working with kids like him could not deal with it and would fight tooth and nail against the overwhelming avalanche once again.
"This narrow-minded judgmental attitude is beneath you", Jack remarked quietly, sitting down at the kitchen table. She opened her eyes in shock. "Excuse me?"
"It's not his parents' bitterness weighing him down. I knew you grew up rich, but I didn't expect you to be this near-sighted", he straightened in his seat, looking straight into her eyes. Alina looked like every word he said to put a knife through her chest – normally, Erik would try to stop this and intervene, but he was still shaken from all the shouting and crashing, so he simply stood there. Jack continued, still piercing holes in her head with his eyes. "His parents, flawed as they are, don't know anything else than what they've lived all their lives. Do you think they believe your flowery promises? Do you think they're doing this to put him down, to spite you personally, to actively sabotage him and themselves? Maybe, partly, yes. But have you considered that they might – at least his mother – be doing this because they think this is the only option they have that will keep them all fed and alive? That they want to give their son a secure future – shitty as it might be – rather than some off-chance at the vague success that in their eyes looks suspiciously close to a scam that will dig them in

even deeper? Have you considered that they don't listen to your ideas and speeches because it's hard to hear almost anything on an empty, fucking, stomach?" His lip trembled slightly at the last word, the only sign of how furious he was. They had never seen him like this; he looked like he was barely holding himself together with tremendous force. He looked at her for a moment as if he had some more choice words to say to her, but instead, he slowly leaned back in his seat, looking at her silently.
Alina, for her part, looked terrified, Erik realized and wondered if she may not have been scolded by anyone else she cared about since she left her father behind in Croatia.
I'll feel the echo of this conversation for a long time, he realized. This was not a failure she'd live down so easily. She had nobody to blame, and a whole lot of people were angry at her. Oh, God, I'm tired. I know I'm supposed to focus on helping her. I know she's been through a lot with me. But I'm so tired. I'll do it, but I'm so, so tired.
Jack may have realized the same thing, or maybe he was simply tired himself, and after a while, he stood up and grabbed his coat. He walked towards the door, stopping and turning at the doorway.
"Your heart is in the right place if that's of any consolation to you. But you'll never go further than this if you refuse to adapt to the real world." With those words, he closed the door behind him with a bit more gentleness than normally and left the room in complete silence.
Alina started sobbing before the sound of his footsteps faded, and didn't stop for hours no matter what anyone tried to say to her; in fact, she didn't even look at them, didn't seem to register anything they said. Erik had never seen her like this, never considered what it looked like from the outside, to see someone so distressed and disconnected from the world; he was usually the one lost in his head with her trying to reach him. This sudden shift was something he was completely unprepared for; it filled him with panicked desperation as frustration stuttered his unsuccessful attempts to console her, followed by shame at the thought of what she had to endure with him until now.
"This won't be fun for anyone", Amelija said to him in French after Alina excused herself and went to bed. Amelija also tried comforting Alina, but her heart had already turned to stone; all the hours she put into teaching a child who could barely read advanced mathematics were for nothing, and she could either repress her anger, sadness, and betrayal or do something

very bad and not at all helpful.
Erik stared at the door for a second but didn't move.
"She was never good at accepting defeat. This might take a few days."
Amelija shook her head.
Erik sighed.
"Jack is right", she remarked. "I'm afraid this might be a necessary lesson for her to grow up."
He wasn't in the right mood for another discussion.
"Shame about the kid", she added. "He's clever. I loved him. If it was me in her place, I think I'd be damn near broken-hearted. It's a god-damn tragedy, but I don't think there's anything anyone can do."
"Do me a favor and don't repeat any of that in front of your sister", he said dryly. "We don't have that many plates left."
Erik didn't immediately follow Alina after she stormed off; there was always a certain gestation period between her anger and self-doubt, and he rarely had any luck talking to her while she was still digesting her feelings. He was not in a hurry; he finished his work for tomorrow while Amelija occasionally came out of her room and looked at him with her arms crossed and suspicion in her eyes.
"One of us should go talk to her", she said quietly, leaning on the doorframe of her room. Alina had gone to Erik's room, probably unthinking, and the implication was that it would be him to go after her.
"No", he replied, not looking up from his notes.
"No?"
"I'll talk to her later."
"I don't want her to be alone in that state."
"Neither do I", he looked up at Amelija. "But in case you haven't noticed, we only managed to upset her further, so maybe she wants to be alone. Maybe she wants to think about something else for five minutes before we remind her about all this again."
"I hope you know what you're doing", Amelija pointed a finger at him.
"I do not."
Erik knocked on the door to his room, aware of the irony, a few hours later. He received no answer, so he gently opened the door with his elbow as his hands were occupied by various things.
"Alina", he said quietly. She was sitting on his bed, her chin resting on her knees, in the same child-like gesture he had already seen several times

when she thought the world was ending.
She nodded but didn't pay attention to him.
Erik came inside and sat on the bed, presenting her with some bread and cheese on a plate, a bottle of strong liquor Amelija had brought from Croatia and a deck of playing cards.
Alina obediently took the food and opened the bottle, remarking only "I thought we said we'd drink less."
"That's still valid - I just thought you might want a short vacation from your thoughts."
"I do", she took a sip.
"I'd like you to teach me that card game you played with your sister", he said, taking out the cards and mixing them.
"Briškula?" Alina looked at the cards. "These are not my briscola cards. These are standard bezique cards. But we could still play briškula with it, just let me take out some -"
"Do you know how to play the other one?"
"Bezique? Certainly. Do you remember me playing it with Auntie Giry?"
"We can play that too. Whatever you'd like."
"Alright", she mumbled, eating her sandwiches and taking swigs of alcohol.
"I see what you're doing, and you know what, you're right."
"I don't know what you're talking about", he said. "Am I mixing them right?"
"You're distracting me."
"I am. What of it?"
"Nothing. Thank you."
Alina was remarkably good at cards, even when she was distressed, drunk, and simultaneously explaining the rules and trying to win. She managed to win the first few rounds, but as Erik quickly learned the rules and she quickly got less and less sober, her advantage was diminishing, and she had to put actual effort into winning. He managed to trick a few surprised laughs out of her by playing wildly unorthodox moves and getting away with it.
"That's- that's not how you play this game", she concluded when she got bored of it, putting the cards back together. She wiped the few crumbs off of Erik's bed and put everything away.
"Was I not within the rules?"
"You were, but barely. But I'll let it slide because I haven't had a game this

amusing in years." she sighed. "Thank you. This was indeed a good vacation from my thoughts. Unfortunately, the problem will still be here tomorrow, and I have no idea how I'm going to solve it."
"We."
"Sorry?" she turned to him, wiping a loose tear.
"We are going to solve it. I'm going to help you. We've always done these things together, and you've never left me alone when I had unsolvable problems; what makes you think I'll leave you to handle this all alone? Even Jack, Amelija, they've done all they could for Walter all along - do you think they'll abandon you now?"
"We should have done something sooner", she whispered. "We should have - should have removed that man from his family somehow. Hurting them- he's continuously hurting them, and now they have fewer and fewer options to get away from him. He's slowly making it worse while we're lying to ourselves. We should have done something sooner."
"We- perhaps", he said, struggling to keep his focus as Alina started crying again. "Do you think we could have? I don't think anybody would have stood on Walter's side, including Walter himself. I don't think anybody would have believed us if we told them where Walter's injuries were from, back when he was a delinquent constantly getting into fights, or that anybody would have cared." he paused. "Unless you're suggesting a less… legal route, in which case, I could have done that, I suppose…?"
"No", she said. "No, I won't risk you going to prison, I promised you. I'll deal with this somehow, but I won't have anything happen to you. I'd sooner kill Preston myself."
"Please don't."
"No, I won't, of course. But it still frustrates me- how many more options he has to ruin their lives than I do for making them better. You'd think the law was made to keep people like him protected, instead of children like Walter and Sam."
Erik had just about had enough of patiently waiting while Alina was crying, and he outstretched his arms to embrace her. She didn't do anything, but at least she didn't protest either.
"Alina", he whispered into her ear as she stared into the distance. "Alina, I know you're sad. You have every right to be. You have every right to take this as badly as you will, and I will pull you through, as you have done for me countless times. I will make it better. I promise I will."

Alina looked at her hands. "You don't need to make me better. The world is simply a terrible place, and it's about time I got used to that fact. One person can not change it. I can not change it. It just is what it is."
"The world is a terrible place", he gently moved a stray hair from her temple. "It's monstrous, even, and dark, and cold. And terrible things happen every day and nobody blinks an eye or turns their head as they see them. You don't need to tell me that. I won't disagree with you."
Alina said nothing and made no sound as a few more tears streaked her cheeks.
"I have no right and no intention to ask of you to pull yourself together, or to not be so miserable, or to accept reality as it is. As wicked as the world is, it's not irredeemable as long as someone like you can cry for someone else's misery. It might make it easier for you if you hardened yourself and found a good explanation for why everything happens for a reason, why people deserve to suffer, and why only the strongest should prevail. But I won't tell you to do it, because nothing in the world would have any worth anymore."
"I'm tired of crying", she uttered bitterly. "And all for nothing."
"No, not all for nothing. Maybe you can't save everyone you meet. I will do everything I can to make this better, I promise you. It will never, could be all for nothing. Everything you did will be remembered, I can't explain to you how, but I can promise it because I was there once, long ago, and it mattered. And I remembered."
He took a deep breath. "Alina, darling, I won't ask you to stop crying, to pull yourself together, or to not despair. You can cry and rage and despair all you want, and it's about time I took care of you and helped you, instead of the other way around. All of us - me, Jack, Yana, we'll all do everything we can to help you with this. We'll think of something. But I must ask you one thing. You cannot give up even if you don't succeed. I need you to keep making this world a redeemable place. Keep crying for lost children, keep helping people that are forgotten, and keep coaxing the good out of this world with your cookies and your stories and your laughter. If I can help you keep that light and that conviction however I can, through this broken and monstrous world, it will be the most important thing I'll ever do. Please allow me at least to try."
Alina wrapped her arms tightly around her lover's body, burying her face in his chest. "You're already helping."

Chapter 43: Mirror

Alina knew Jack would have had a lot to say if he knew she was going to find Walter, so the logical thing to do was not to tell him. She hadn't spoken to him properly since that day; she was hurt and offended and Jack seemed equally so. While he still spoke to Erik, he seemed closed off from Alina entirely and for some reason, Alina didn't know and had stopped talking to Amelija as well. She didn't tell any of them she was going to visit Walter to say goodbye; she knew what they would think - it's too early, don't disturb them now, wait until we figure out what to do - but it was stronger than her and her common sense. Alina could not think about Walter - stripped of all control over his own life, doing physical labor when only a month ago he was solving math problems, serious among adults instead of fishing with his brothers - without her heart clenching into a tight little fist, and she could not leave him there with what she imagined to be terrible despair and loneliness without at least seeing him and letting him know she was still there if he needed her.

Walter worked at a factory - she found out as much from Samuel who talked to her a few more times, wary and worried of her bringing up certain difficult topics again. Alina didn't insist on mentioning anything again so soon; she carefully avoided saying anything that might upset Sam any further. The situation at home was tense, and the current peace seemed only another calm before another storm.

Amelija refused to go, for reasons she decided to keep to herself. Instead, she told Alina to give her best to Walter and packed him a gift: a brand new mathematics textbook she bought in a bookstore.

It was a boring, physically taxing job. Workers were tired, weary-looking; they worked on a track, each doing the same repetitive motions hundreds of times, for hours, every day. Alina remembered with sorrow how much Walter liked variety; how quickly he'd get bored of doing the same thing over and over again once he got the hang of it. She tried to push back the

thought.
"Sir", she said to the man they pointed to her as their manager. "Sir, I'm sorry, my name is Alina Boričević and I need to speak with a worker of yours, just for a few minutes."
"Is something burning?" he said coldly. "Break is in two hours. You can come back then."
"I understand, sir, but I do have my job to go to later, and it will only take a few minutes. His name is Walter Preston, he hasn't been here long - I used to be his teacher. I'd just like to say hello. I'll be out of your hair soon; won't disturb him again."
"Five minutes", he said, then turned around. "Preston! Come here!"
Walter straightened up from what he was doing across the room - at least he was assembling something that looked complex to Alina, perhaps that would keep him interested for a while - and frowned suspiciously. He wiped his hands, however, and walked over to them.
"Preston, this lady is here to see you. You have five minutes, and I'll take them from your break later. Be quick", the man said, and went off on his way, leaving them alone.
"Hi, Walter", Alina smiled.
"Are you also here to tell me I'm wasting my life?" Walter frowned at Alina.
"No", she said gently. "I'm here to visit you. I wanted to know how you were doing."
"Fine", he shrugged. "I'm just fine."
"That's good", she smiled. "Do you like it here? Do they treat you well?"
"Sure."
"Ah, good. They wouldn't like it if I had to talk to them."
"It's not so bad", Walter remarked, wiping his face with the back of his hand. "I mean, the work is hard, the bosses are constantly on my ass, and to be fair I think they're paying me too little just because I'm too young to complain. But the others are nice. Back in school, everyone looked at me like I was still secretly stupid. But here, they all look at me like I'm really smart - you should have seen their faces when they realized I could do fractions and ratios on my own. And I'm stronger than people think. So they're pretty impressed so far."
"I see", Alina smiled. "Well, you are quite impressive on your own, Walter."
"Whatever", Walter waved his hand back at her, both embarrassed and taking advantage of the fact she was no longer his teacher and he didn't

have to address her properly.
"I'm glad they're smart enough to recognize that", Alina added.
"Yeah, so far. But they say they won't let me do anything interesting for years. They just let me watch. It's a bit… annoying", Walter sighed, encouraged by Alina's surprising open-mindedness. "So far, all I do is… put together all the same parts, for hours at a time. It's boring."
"I can imagine", Alina nodded. "At least you're learning, right? You're a quick learner, they'll give you more things to do, I'm sure. It's in their interest, too. Just do your best to listen when they show you something new, and ask a lot of questions. Bore them with questions. Trust me."
"They might kick my ass, but sure", Walter remarked.
Alina smiled.
"Look, I'm sorry I quit school", Walter hurried again. "I know you probably think I'm just another lowlife kid, but dad said we need the money. I'm not gonna let them work all day without help."
"I understand", Alina nodded. "I was wondering if maybe there is a way for you to do both. Maybe there's a job you could do with shorter hours, so you can continue your education. We've got other options I could arrange if your family decides to ask us. I'd gladly discuss it with your parents."
"Dad says it's a waste of time to try to do both. Says I'll be shitty both at work and in school - and that's just dumb."
"Nothing you do is a waste, Walter", she shook her head. "Nothing you decide to do. Do you know why?"
Walter stared stubbornly at his hands.
"Because, I know that whatever you do, you'll do it well. You'll make it worthy. There's nothing wrong with whatever you want. Nothing." she leaned forward and took his hand. "If you decide to come back to us, I'll do my absolute damnedest to make it possible, do you understand? But if this is truly what you want, I won't think any less of you. I know you have your reasons. I know you're smart enough to decide. I know you know what you want from life because life has forced you to realize it a lot sooner than the rest of us - and I won't pretend to know what it is, but I just want you to know that I'll help you with it, whatever it may be. Alright?"
"Why are you here, then? If not to talk me out of it?" Walter looked at her with renewed suspicion.
"I just wanted to say goodbye, in case I won't have you in my class", Alina broke out of her polished teacher persona and her eyes showed very sincere

sorrow for a moment. "I will miss you, Walt."
"Okay, well", Walt forgot how to speak for a moment. "Thanks."
Alina smiled.
"Uh, I have to get back to work now", he pointed out. The man from before waved from the distance at Alina to hurry her up.
"Of course. Walter, now that you're here, I hope you'll be happy, and I expect you to do your best. You can be an engineer, and if you do one day have the chance to change your mind - it's never too late. Remember that." She walked away, then turned around again. "I almost forgot. My sister is going home soon, probably by the end of September. She sent you this book - you don't have to unwrap it now, or- alright, unwrap it now. If you wish to say goodbye to her before she leaves - I'm sure Samuel and I can make it happen without anyone knowing."
"Thank you, miss Alina", Walter said, putting his working gloves back on. He put the book back into its wrappings very carefully and put it in his pocket. His eyes were slightly watery when he looked at the book.
"I can't," Amelija whispered. "I can't stay here, but I can't leave. I-"
"It's a choice you have to make, Amelija", Jack drawled out coldly. "Refusing to choose also implies a choice. You can't keep avoiding the issue - we don't have much time left together."
"You-" Amelija hissed at him in frustration.
"I will not make it for you, no", he retorted. "It's your life. I want you to make it for yourself. I'll agree with it, either way."
"Well then if you will, why don't you just-" Amelija rambled furiously.
"God damnit, Amelija! Just tell me if you want me or not! It's not that difficult!" Jack burst. "I don't care for your family's made-up rules and flimsy excuses! Either you want me, or you don't, it's that simple!"
"Fine! I do!" Amelija spat back at him. "And you want me, as well, I assume? And ten years from now, I am to bet on my life we will still want each other? Because there's no going back if we decide. Which one of us will abandon their entire life, everything they've ever known to be together? Shall we flip a coin?"
"I will come with you if you want me", Jack said matter-of-factly. Amelija could find nothing indicative of either truth or lie in his eyes; in fact, she could find nothing at all.
"What?" she stopped in her tracks, wide-eyed.
"So what? I'm assuming we'll be back and forth either way. Your sister lives

here - will get married here- and your family lives over the pond. It will happen. If you want me to officially go after you and ask your father for your hand in marriage, I'll play along with your little traditionalist charade. If you want me to change my address, I'll do that as well."
"You don't know that Alina will-"
"Open your eyes, Amelija", Jack shrugged. "Alina had little to lose back home, and a talent for starting anew. And she hopped onto that ship as soon as she fell in love, well- some of us are just like that, luckily for you."
Amelija struggled to find words. "But- your friends- your job-"
"I'm sure they have jobs and decent people there. Do they? Is there something I don't know?"
"My- my father and mother are- quite controlling, and they might not approve-"
"Good luck with that. They can certainly try. As long as you want me, they'll do well to adopt, unless they want to see their only remaining daughter gone as well." Jack shrugged again, like all of Amelija's horrible anxieties were nothing, like there was nothing he could imagine stopping him, and it annoyed her to no end.
"Is that it? None of this matters to you? You'll just waltz right in, and make your own rules?" She threw her arms in the air.
"As I usually do."
"It will never work!" she yelled. "It's- it's not that simple, no matter how you try to make it like it is! There's a million - million things, and you're just ignoring me-"
"Listen to me", Jack lowered his voice, taking his hand out of his pocket for the first time to point directly at Amelija. "Yes, there are a million things that could go wrong. No, it's not that simple. But we will either do this, and tackle those million things as they come, or you'll keep whining and fighting me every step of the way. Now, that will get old pretty quickly, so if you intend to do that, you might have been right all along and it will never work. Either you decide it will work, right now, or it won't."
"You're serious", Amelija blinked. "You're serious. These are stubborn, manipulative, intolerant people, and you-"
"So? Do you think I want them to call me 'son'? To change their ways and see me as one of them? I don't care what they might think. What I do know is that if you and I are to be together, we'll have to be together, not fight one another. We'll have plenty of other problems to fight; if we're not unified

we'll have no chance of winning."
Amelija kept silent for a while before replying, "You're right."
"Oh, I am? What a surprise."
"I'll be back", she said, getting up and taking her things. "I'll tell you what I've decided before I leave."
"But-"
"Shut up, Jack. I'll tell you before I leave. I have to go now; my sister is in a sorry state and she needs me."
"Do you have a minute?" Erik asked Amelija that evening, carefully opening the door to Alina's room. Alina was cooking something for dinner; she was still uncharacteristically quiet and sad for her, but the color seemed to be returning to her cheeks, so he decided to welcome any progress that came.
"I do", said the voice on the other side, so he carefully entered and closed the door behind him gently, leaning on it. There was nowhere to sit except for the bed and small desk with one chair, and Erik instinctively decided, looking at Amelija, that he was better off further from her.
"I saw Jack today", Erik remarked, leaning on the door to Alina's room and looking at the desk where Amelija was reading her book and sewing simultaneously. It wasn't like her to work so frantically; she usually took her time to enjoy doing one thing at a time.
"Are you speaking to me?" Amelija said, not looking up. "Thank you for the information."
"Mhm. He looks terrible like he hasn't slept in days. He almost stepped into the street and ended up under a carriage today", Erik continued, taking off his gloves. It was warm, and Amelija had been a guest for two months now; surely she could handle seeing his hands, he decided with somewhat unexpected defiance.
Amelija didn't care in the slightest about the tremendous gesture of trust bestowed upon her; she never looked up. "I hope he solves whatever matter is causing him such anguish."
"I'd say it's more than one matter, they just have the same last name", Erik continued, looking with annoyance at both of his current roommates. "I suppose it's not easy being the only adult in your circle of friends."
"Do you reckon you know what that's like?" Amelija finally looked up at him. Now it was obvious she looked even worse than Jack- under her steely, defiant look it was obvious she was near crying. Her eyes had dark circles

around them from not sleeping, and her hair was pinned with a lot less care than usual.
"Not at all." Erik bit his lip. "Alina told me you're leaving soon. I won't be meddling in your affairs, but - if you need help with anything before you leave, just say so."
"I don't", Amelija hissed.
"Alright", Erik bowed his head. "If you change your mind, the offer still stands."
"You'll have to meet Nikola now", Amelija pointed out, eager to change the subject. "You can't avoid him anymore."
"I'm growing used to mandatory introductions and meetings with people, don't worry. I'll survive it, one way or another. I just wanted to say-" he suddenly stopped, his spine straightening as he listened intently.
"What-" Amelija asked, only to be shushed.
"Someone is just outside. Someone I don't know. Be silent", he said just as someone banged loudly on the front door. Alina was much closer and too quick for him to stop her, and he was probably being paranoid anyway, it wouldn't help anyone if he made a scene-
Alina opened the door without even asking or looking who it was, distracted and scattered from everything that happened that day. Erik knew, even before she opened the door and froze in place, who it would be. Some ancient, monstrous, mold-covered, forgotten part of him knew instantly what would happen, even though the rest of him regarded it as a ridiculous notion.
Preston stood in the doorway, clearly drunk out of his mind, eyes full of hate and fury; Alina opened her mouth to try and say something that would calm the situation, but he didn't seem to be interested in talking. Instead, he hurled himself at her, his hands reaching for her neck.
Alina took a split second too long to react; she tried backing away, but one of Preston's hands already closed around her neck and she let out a quiet gasp as she grabbed his arm; it was the most horrifying sound Erik had ever heard, and it made him flinch as he was swiftly moving towards them. He was a second too late; he could have prevented it - the two halves of him took a second to argue what to do. Now, however, it was decided unanimously.
Before Preston could even notice him, Erik came out of some corner of the house and walked up to him in three quick and precise steps; Alina

automatically moved out of the way as much as she could. The next two things happened so quickly that Preston barely had time to process them: first, Erik's fist found his solar plexus with intensity carefully calculated to put him on his knees, but not kill him; then before Preston could properly open his mouth to start yelling Erik grabbed the front of his jacket without a word and dragged him a few steps away from Alina.
Preston bent over into a ball of pain, as Erik stood indifferently in front of him.
"A smarter man would have heeded Jack's warning", said something that sounded less and less like him with each following word. "I must have misjudged you when I thought I could reason with you like a human being. I'm about to correct that mistake now."
Jack, Amelija thought as she jumped out of Alina's room through the low window and sped off in the direction where she hoped she couldn't be seen easily in the dark. She had to do something quickly. Both of these men are dangerous. At least one of them is dangerous for Alina. Erik isn't thinking. I can think but I can't protect her. I need someone who can both think and throw a punch at the same time, ideally.
Jack. Help me.
"Erik!" Alina yelled from the doorframe, not daring to come closer. Her fingers gripped the frame so tightly in panic, that they'd gone almost completely white. "Erik, stop! You're going to kill him!"
"Get inside, Alina! Now!" Something yelled from Erik's throat with Erik's voice, but it was the farthest thing from Erik she could imagine. "If he touches you, he'll be dead before dawn!"
Alina looked into his eyes for a moment before speaking. She could have probably manipulated him out of this somehow - he didn't seem so far gone or mindless to her, he would probably respond to Erik, please, I know you can do the right thing, let's just let it go, nothing bad is going to happen - but she could see it in his eyes that he was already expecting it. He was expecting her to try and manipulate him out of it, and she couldn't see if it was pure paranoia that she would put him in danger, no, God I hope he's not that insane or if some flicker of light from behind his eyes was begging for her to tell him to do the right thing despite alarms in his head screaming danger.
So, you do know what the right thing to do is.
Ah, but I have no intention to drag it out of you each time. What was it you

said - a duet is two equals playing together? You're ready to arrive at some conclusions yourself, without me pulling the heartstrings.
I can't love you if I have to pull your strings.
"Very well", she said quietly. "I leave it in your hands."
She spun on her heel and crossed over the threshold, closing the door behind her.
Erik nodded once and turned away, grabbing Preston by his shirt and dragging him off into the shadows where he wouldn't be seen or bothered by anybody who might peek through the window.
"Let me go, you fucking freak", Preston panted as he tried to stay upright. "Let me go, or I swear to God-"
"Unwise", the ghost said. "Erik would have killed you for talking like this. Maybe it's good that it's me now? I won't kill you for it; you can't provoke me."
"Listen to me", the empty shell standing in front of Preston mimicked Erik's voice, struggling to keep speaking English. Preston's eyes widened at the empty, bottomless yellow eyes staring at him, and the hollow, inhuman voice that was currently speaking into his face.
"I am taking you very seriously." the shell whispered. "And I know what you are capable of. If something happens to Alina, it will be too late for me to regret not killing you now. By all means, it would be pragmatic to do it now that I can call it self-defense or whatever nonsense they call it. I'm still undecided, however, since she doesn't want me to do it, for whatever reason. You might yet change my mind about it if you're wise."
Preston opened his mouth, wanting to point out the obvious, but -
"Yes, I'm aware you can try to scream or call for help, but trust me - there will be no need for that. You will have no time to do that. I've seen now that you will stop at nothing. If you don't choose your next words very carefully, I will lose any reason for the restraint I am currently showing for not killing you. If she's ever harmed in any way, it's over for both of us, I can promise you that. Did you not consider that, before you showed up at my door and tried to kill her?"
"I wasn't-"
"Why are you here?" Erik demanded, his voice sharp as a knife.
"Your woman is talking to my son behind my back!" Preston yelled. "I want him nowhere near you folk, he's better off doing an honest job than following her imaginary plans - and now she even followed him to work to

manipulate him!"
"You're trying to tell me your first instinct against that was to kill her, instead of simply telling her not to talk to him anymore? Was she ever forbidden from talking to him; have you ever tried to reason with her like a man?" Erik replied. His voice was going up and down in pitch and his body twitched as if two creatures were fighting for control over it. "Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps you are better off dead, then."
"I don't want to kill her", Preston growled through his drunken anger. "But someone needs to show her her place, and if you won't do it, I-"
He was cut off by another fist to his temple. The blow was painful, and made Preston's head spin; this time he remained in place, silent.
"The way to reason with you is to speak your language", the ghost concluded. "We might get somewhere, yet. Now for the important things. We need to discuss your attack on my fiancee, and how you're immediately going to remove yourself from our lives and leave this entire island before I've had a chance to change my mind."
Truth be told, facing an opponent he couldn't intimidate, scream or throw his hands at made Hank Preston more than a little unnerved. In lack of easier options, he found himself dragged into the argument.
"Haven't you had enough?" Preston yelled at him. "You won't stop until you take my boy away from me?"
"We're not taking your boy away from you!" Erik yelled back, ignoring the black spots at the corners of his vision. The sharp, black rage was deadly, but mute now after it said its part - focusing his mind on speaking seemed to keep it at bay. For now. "We're trying to give him a future! She's giving him a choice!"
"He's too young to make choices, god damnit!" Preston waved his hands exasperatedly. "You're having him chase a pipe dream, you're going to ruin him, put him in debt before he's old enough to know better!"
"And you're going to make those choices for him?" Erik thundered, running his hand through his hair. "How did you like having choices made for you? Do you think I liked it, having my future stolen? Being turned into this godforsaken shadow of a man? Do you like living day to day, knowing you can't get back what they stole from you before you were old enough to remember? What makes you people so certain you can decide your children's future?"
Preston stared at him, wide-eyed. Something in Erik's shaky, twitching

hands and fevered eyes made him too scared to respond.
"Do you think it's alright to assume the best your boy can do?" he rambled on. "Have you made a little mold for him already? Will you cut out every part of him that doesn't fit, until there's nothing left? Answer me!"
Preston blinked, unsure what exactly he wanted to be answered. "I just want him to have a secure future, not a - "
"LIAR!" Erik shouted, too upset to notice how Preston cowered and shifted a little further away from him. "You're lying! You want him to spend his life atoning for your mistakes, rationalizing your bitter little world, as if that were even possible! You will sacrifice your own child's life rather than admit there's something more to the world than what you see!"
As the rage left his vision and his voice, shame slowly crept in. I am the least likely person in the world to do this right. I may have had a chance to persuade him, in some other universe. And now it's over.
Preston stared at him for a minute. He could admit the man was right at one particular thing:
He didn't want Walter to turn into this bitter, unhinged shadow yelling at him.
In the ensuing few seconds of silence, Preston's eyes shifted from Erik to somewhere behind his shoulder: he turned around and noticed Jack approaching quickly, Amelija standing further away, still on the street. He must have completely lost his composure, to not have heard him arrive.
"Good evening", Jack said quietly, walking in a way Erik had not seen him walk until then, sharp and careful. His jacket opened and closed as he walked, revealing a holstered gun slung from his shoulder and around his torso. "Hank."
Preston stared at Jack with a completely different kind of horror from how he looked at Erik.
"Hank, I am told you showed up at these people's private property and attacked the woman who lives there", Jack continued, perfectly composed. "Now, is that true?"
Preston looked at him defiantly, then said, "My son is being turned against me."
"That's sad, if true", Jack said. "You do understand that if you attack someone in their own home, I could make a very strong case that you were killed in self-defense, right? You do know who I am? You are aware that no jury or judge in this state would doubt me, after all, I've done?"

"I'm not on their prop" Preston started.
"Really?" Jack raised an eyebrow. "You must be mistaken. I'm positive that your body will be found inside their own house. All the witnesses will testify with the same story. Quite a clear-cut case. Do you think your sons and daughter will mourn you, Hank? Enough to question it, given your… history?"
"What do you want?" Preston spat out. "You could've killed me already."
"I want to destroy you", Jack said matter-of-factly. "I'm giving you merely a way to choose how I'll do it, nothing else. Erik can kill you right now- which will be messy, to be honest - or you could go to the police with me tonight and admit what happened here. I'll have your written admission, and nothing less. And then they will decide what to do with you. If I were Alina, I'd sue for a handsome amount - we'll see. But you will be alive, that much I can promise."
Preston looked at him in silence for a long time, then nodded.
"Let's go, then", Jack waved at him. "Don't test me."
"Um", Amelija started "I should maybe -"
"Come with me", Jack waved at her too, much more gently. "I need witnesses; you saw what happened."
"But Alina-"
"Erik will stay with Alina. You're staying with me tonight. They need to calm down, both of them. You'll be safe in my house."
Amelija looked over at Erik, who didn't seem to be in a condition to calm Alina down; his breathing was still frantic, his hands twitching. Jack seemed undisturbed by it.
"Erik", he looked him straight in the eye. "I need you to calm down. You did the right thing, but it's not over. Go home. I'll come to see you in the morning. Let's go", he nodded to Preston who began walking, still drunk and holding the side of his head where Erik had hit him.
Erik watched Preston leave as his hands and arms still shook violently, itching to snap the man's neck while it was still not too late, while he still had the upper hand - his vision was blurry and speckled with black, but he could still somewhat hang on to himself and stand still.
Alina, he thought, this was for you. I tried to do the right thing, though it took me a little bit. I hope you can forgive me if I made it worse.
And
what now, that she has

seen
it
Erik blinked a few times, forcefully trying to clear his vision.
Maybe she didn't notice it.
Maybe it's not
that
ob vio us
Erik tried, so hard, to get his vision back and his arms to stop shaking, as he felt himself fall deeper. Wild, burning panic took over, so all-consuming he thought he might die; leave his body and keep walking this earth as a dead man. Thoughts, once a painful ball of knotted string, were now just
fractures
maybe she for I've s you
go
tell her
see her one lase
Don't hurt her, Erik begged with his last coherent thought before he disappeared and the other thing - the ghost, the rot, whatever it was, took his place for what would be the last time.
Erik entered the house very slowly and quietly; if Alina was any less experienced with handling her distress she may have missed the slight twitch in his shoulders and elbows as he locked the door behind him - once, then twice - then looked at the lock for a little bit too long. She made no sign she'd noticed anything, but her whole body was suddenly calmly alert. Erik lingered for a moment longer then walked over to the window, his back still turning to her.
"I'm sorry. I failed you", said the ghostly voice that seemingly wasn't coming from him. "He tried to help, but I may have made it worse."
"What did you do?" Alina asked with feigned calmness as all alarms blared in her head. It immediately seemed like a bad idea as soon as she said it, as Erik gave no sign that he heard the question, except that the slight shake of his fingers, clasped on his back, suddenly became more prominent. She noticed it, and her mind began to race.
He may be done something really bad, but it just doesn't seem likely.
What's all this about, then? What should I do? How do I get the truth out?
In the short pause that came from Alina's thinking, Erik's arms and fingers never stopped their shaking and twitching as he pretended not to notice and

stared out the window, stiff as a board. His spine seemed electrified; Alina could see an occasional spasm that went through his back or neck, jerking his arm or head slightly as it jolted through his trembling form.
Alina's heart broke, and her iron will crumble.
She stood up slowly and quietly, crossing over the room in several small, pitter-patter steps uncharacteristic to her, and stopped by the window right next to him. She tried to smile at him, but a sudden jolt that went through his arm reminded her it might not be a good idea to look directly at him. She looked through the window as well, at the dark, empty street.
Confused, upset, and at a loss for what to do, she began humming to herself; an old lullaby she hadn't heard in over fifteen years. She could remember with sudden clarity the last time she heard it - on the day the great earthquake struck in Zagreb, her grandmother sang it to her as aftershocks raced through the city and Alina's heart beat against her chest as they trembled in their makeshift shelter - a forceful, savage ripple that tore through her home much like the one that seemed to be tearing through Erik's body right now.
As she hummed softly, his shaking seemed to calm down a little bit. She trailed off, quieting down, and kept looking out the window in silence when she finished.
"What is that?" the voice inside Erik sounded a little closer to the surface now.
"Just an old lullaby my grandmother used to sing. I just remembered it for some reason."
"We should write it down sometime."
"Yes", she smiled to herself. "It might be a good idea."
Another moment of silence.
"I haven't always been like this", he whispered. "I almost forgot, but there was a time when I wasn't like this. Even when I was miserable, I was still whole. But I was so young I can barely recall it."
Alina opened her mouth to say something, but he continued. "I don't remember the moment that first started chipping away at me- but I do remember the one that d- definitely fractured something." He turned to her, his head snapping a little too quickly to the side. "Antoinette was smart enough to break into a cage with nothing but pliers and some rudimentary lockpicks. And she was smart enough to coax me out of it and kind enough to take me h-ho-" his voice broke and he shut his eyes tightly, clutching at

his head; but then he straightened up again. "But one thing she was not."
Alina waited.
"She was not strong enough to stand up to a man nearly twice her size who had no intention of letting me go", he continued. His mouth kept moving, but the voice sounded nothing like him. Alina thought she was hearing some distant, cursed echo from an impossibly deep hole. "She wasn't a murderer. Neither was Erik. Erik, that naive idiot boy who kept hoping through nearly a decade that his m- m- mother would change her mind and come for him. Erik hoped after every whipping that the meal and temporary peace he got meant that things might change. Erik saw his chains, but he l-l-" he had to take a deep breath again, his hands clutching at his hair. "Erik saw his chains, but he still loved his captors, even though he hated them to the bone because he couldn't help himself. Who else did he have left to love? And he would have died there, starving and bleeding and hoping that things would change. He would never have gotten out of there alive, were it not for me." the creature now looked at Alina, moonlight reflecting against its bright yellow eyes. "And so that night Erik thought he was finally free, and when his master appeared out of nowhere, he would not have had it in him to do what it took to get out. But I did. Erik fainted with fear and h-heartbreak as his master tried to strike the woman who came to save him - and I woke up."
"And what did you do?" Alina asked gently.
"I don't know, I didn't stick around to check. Erik could never remember any of it. But I'd assume, even if he survived, it was by pure luck and not my actual intention. It's not likely. And since then, I've been like this."
"Who are you?" Alina asked. "What do you want?"
"I… don't know", the ghost shook its head. "I don't think I'm anyone or anything. I'm bits that fell off over the years as he fractured, and grew together into an m-monster. I just want to live."
"What does Erik want?"
"He wants me to disappear", the ghost shrugged. "Wouldn't you?"
"No", she shook her head slowly. "No, I don't want that."
The ghost stared at her in surprise. "What do you want, then?"
"I want all of him, which I suppose includes you too."
"I will be what dooms you both in the end", the ghost said, seemingly emotionless. "He certainly thinks so. He's terrified of me. The only solace he has is that if he loses you because of me, he can simply end us both, and

I don't want that. It's a stalemate. I can't control him, but he can't get rid of me either." another ripple tore through his arms. The ghost was valiant in its attempts to sound indifferent to what it was saying, even as it failed spectacularly.
Alina frowned. "And you want to hurt me?"
"I-" the ghost stammered, then stopped to think. "No, I don't. Unless you try to hurt me. But how can I know that if I'm not paying attention? Erik trusted it, and it got him in a cage. I killed, and it got me out."
"Did Erik not trust Antoinette first? Otherwise, he never would have tried to leave, and you would never have been born."
"Perhaps." the ghost turned away from her again.
"The way I see it, both of you did it together."
"P-Perhaps."
"How could I hate you, when I know you saved his life?" she pleaded earnestly. "I don't want you gone. I just want you to rest. It's over. You're safe. Don't you want to rest?"
The ghost made no sound.
"I have no pity to spare for men who keep children in cages", she frowned with fury, pacing around the room. "I don't care if you killed Erik's master. Good riddance!"
The ghost turned to her. "D-does it does not bother you that I can kill someone he l-loves?"
"Loves?" Alina spat out. "As if that's why you killed him? Any love he may have felt for that man if I'm going to call him a man, was purely out of Erik's goodness! If I ever treat someone who loves me the way
Erik's master treated him, you're more than welcome to tear me to shreds!"
"I probably would", the ghost agreed. "But otherwise no. I think."
"Good! Then we have no problem here!" Alina threw her hands up. The ghost flinched with its whole body, clenching its fists - but when she made no move to attack, it settled.
The two of them stood silently, a few feet apart, and stared at each other for a moment.
"I didn't kill Hank Preston", the ghost stated with an almost child-like air of fear and embarrassment that clashed with its prior, monstrous demeanor.
"Erik thought Preston was going to h-h-harm you, and I was ready to do it, but…"
He swallowed. "But I didn't do it. I- definitely scared him, though. But I

stuck around to check, this time. Erik talked to him. To them. I can't tell if it did any good."
"What did Erik say?" she asked, slightly shaken.
"The truth. Preston attacked you. He went for your neck; I saw it too. He's a danger to his own family, too. If Preston keeps abusing his son, the boy will end up like me. I think Erik will be able to tell you more details tomorrow." It shrugged. "I didn't understand much of it."
Alina stared in confusion, scrambling for something to say.
"Don't hate him. It's my fault", the ghost bowed its head at her, mimicking its host's habitual gesture, "He has a hard enough time fighting me even on a good day."
"I don't hate either of you", she managed. "Thank- thank you for stopping yourself." she stepped a little closer.
The ghost nodded slightly; the twitching seemingly dying down. "Yes. If Erik tries to take credit for that - I just want you to know that I was the one who stopped. Even before he woke up."
Alina cocked her head to the side. "Ah. And why?"
"I didn't want you to cry", the ghost admitted shyly, slightly shifting. "I don't like it- that is, he doesn't like it when you cry. And the son - he's still whole. I didn't want to be the one to fracture him."
"I understand", Alina said, slowly taking another step until she was directly in front of the ghost's still slightly-shaking body. She held out both her hands and very slowly took him - the ghost followed her every move but made no effort to stop her - bringing them up to her lips and kissing each of them once. "You were good. You can rest now."
When she looked up again, the eyes that stared back at her belonged to Erik again.

Chapter 44: Aftermath

"You're alive", Erik said after staring at her for a few eternally long moments.

"I think I am", Alina replied, slightly surprised by that bit of news.
Erik lowered his head, and for a moment she thought he was going to kiss her, but he turned her shoulder slightly to take a better look at her neck.
"Does it hurt?"
"No, I don't feel anything."
"It doesn't appear to be serious. We'll see if it's bruised in the morning. And you can talk normally, so-" he looked her in the eyes again. "Why are you not shocked? Or panicking? Or at least a little bit scared?"
"I feel nothing", she repeated. "Really."
He looked her in the eyes a little longer. "This is not the first time a man has attacked you, is it?"
"Well, this was the most severe anyone has ever tried to hurt me. But no, not the first time." she paused. "It's the first time someone has defended me."
"When?"
"Well, as I've told you already, my father is not a gentleman and doesn't take kindly to disobedience. And working in an asylum, things happen. People kick and lunge sometimes. But don't get me wrong. Nobody has ever assaulted me this seriously - I'm good at wiggling out of situations on my own when my throat is open enough that I can speak."
Erik shuddered a little at that sentence but didn't twitch like before. "And you feel nothing when it happens?"
"Usually. But I cannot guarantee what I'll be like tomorrow."
"Tomorrow?" Erik asked quietly. "Why tomorrow?"
"Well, usually after the danger has passed."
"I see," he said, his voice cracking at that sentence for some reason. "After the danger has passed."

"I'm- sorry-" he started again, but she laid her finger over his lips gently, shutting him up.
"You are forgiven", she said. "Darling, I could have been killed on my doorstep tonight. You saved me. You wanted to help me. No matter how this plays out, I won't forget how much you cared about helping me."
"I-" he put his hands on his head again, pulling at his hair. "I completely lost myself just now. I swore to myself you'd never see that-"
"Do you remember what happened? What do we talk about?" Alina asked with careful curiosity.
"I- will, yes, I do remember." he swallowed. "But I didn't have much control over what I said. I'm sorry, those were some terrible things, I never wanted you to hear any of that- "
"And yet I'm still here", she replied.
"You're… still here", his voice cracked and he leaned on the wall, buried his face in his hands, and slid down to the floor. "And the rot is…"
"The rot?" Alina slowly sat down next to him. "Didn't look particularly rotten to me."
Erik looked like he was going to scream, staring ahead of him with his fingers entangled in his hair. "Trust me. It is. I hear it often enough. I'm sorry you heard that. I- if you want to leave - I should leave this is your house - "
"Darling, what in the goddamn hell are you talking about?" Alina suddenly turned to him.
"I - if I can't keep it, myself, under control, you'll be in danger as long as you're with me. I can't stand that. If I had any decency left I'd just get up and go now-"
"Stop", she interrupted. "Right now. Right, this instant. Listen to me for a whole second before you fall back into that hole."
Erik stopped. As much as he may have thought leaving her was the decent thing to do, his body seemed firmly glued to the spot. Coward.
"I'm not in any more danger from your blind passenger now than I was anytime in the past year and a half. If anything, I think I'm in less danger now. You're reacting this way because I found out, and you want to say the words before I say them to you. Stop it. Stop assuming what I want or what I'm saying. Treat me like an autonomous human being with the agency over her own life."
That hit a very, very, very painful nerve, and Erik went completely silent

and still as he felt needles of shame scrape all over his skin.
"Darling", she said, "it's not… it hasn't been that well-hidden until now. I didn't know what exactly it was, but I could tell it was something. It's not your fault - I don't see how you could have hidden it. Nobody has such complete control over themselves every moment of their life as you would like to have."
"But I have to, otherwise -"
"Otherwise, apparently, nothing. Perhaps before, but certainly not now. Nothing happened."
Erik had no choice but to consider that fact.
"Darling", Alina continued carefully, "is it such a radical notion that perhaps there is no part of you that deserves to be tormented or killed?"
"That is not who I am-"
"No, not who you are. Just a little part of you. No bigger than a drop in the ocean. But it's here, and - maybe if you stopped fearing and hating it so much, it would stop consuming you so much in these desperate attempts to survive."
"I don't - I can't live with it-"
"You have so far", she pointed out. "You just can't make peace with it - but could you try, just a little bit, for me?"
"Why? Why, why, why? Don't you see you're in danger?"
"Then I have been in danger all this time. But I'm quite good at sensing danger, and yet, I never did. How curious." Alina sighed. "I simply cannot bring myself to hate any of you - and if you can, I'd like you to face the truth. All of this is you. And instead of pushing it down and hating it, maybe you can turn this part of yourself into something less dangerous - but not by killing it. I'm afraid you might have to show some actual cooperation."
"I promised myself you would never see it. I promised I would keep you safe."
"Well, apparently, the ghost wants me safe as well. We had a nice talk, nothing more. I'm fine. I promised to marry you, Erik - I meant all of you, not just the surface, forever. I meant it."
I love her, the ghost whispered somewhere deep inside his mind. She won't be harmed; the rest is up to you.
What do you mean by that, exactly?
An offer of peace. If you want it.
I

I do.
"I love you", he whispered as he turned to her. "All of me loves you so badly I might just stop fighting it just to make you happy."
Alina woke up the next day at the break of dawn, gasping and breathing frantically, and sat up with her hands clasped protectively around her neck. Erik, who hadn't slept all night imagining everything terrible that could happen if he closed his eyes for a second, shot up from his seat to sit at her side.
"You're alright", he grasped her shoulders gently, looking into her eyes. "You're safe. He didn't hurt you. He'll never get the chance again."
Alina looked at him with wide-eyed fear, shaking her whole body. Her breathing slowly went down to normal.
Then she started to cry.
"You're really fine", Erik tried again clumsily. "You're safe. He won't hurt you- can't hurt you- neither will I-"
Alina kept crying, not paying attention to his words. She moved a little closer to him, and Erik finally understood what was happening; he put his arms around her and stroked her hair as she cried into his shirt.
"That's right", he just said. "It's safe now. The danger has passed."
Jack and Amelija waited until mid-afternoon to return. Alina was up and about by then, still shaken but seemingly returning to normal. Jack knocked politely on the door, then upon some thought, clarified through the wood "It's me, Erik, it's us."
"I know", Erik said, fumbling with the lock and the chair he'd put on the door. When he opened it, Jack and Amelija looked at him with concern, both uneasy but unharmed.
"Alina!" Amelija exclaimed and hurried to hug her sister. "You're alright! Are you hurt? Are you traumatized? I'm sorry I didn't come to see you last night, they said it would be better to wait!"
"It's just a little bruise", Alina showed the part of her neck with several finger-shaped purple spots. "He didn't have time to do anything."
"Oh, I am going to kill that bastard", Amelija remarked, then calmed down. "Well, if there's anything left of him once they are finished with him", she gestured at the men.
"Glad to see you're fine, Alina", Jack said solemnly. Alina appeared to be getting back to normal much quicker than Erik, who was still in yesterday's clothes looking like he hadn't slept at all. "I think we should take a walk

while we figure out our next moves."
Both of them looked away from him and opened their mouths to try changing the subject, but Jack wouldn't be fooled so easily. This was not his first time, either.
"Yes, I know it's tempting to barricade yourselves inside, but you really shouldn't do that. The longer you're cooped up in here, the harder it will be to get out. Come on. Get dressed, Alina, and we'll wait. Erik, I'd like to speak to you outside."
"No", he replied.
"Just outside the front door. Literally. Amelija will stay here with her. Nothing will happen."
"No", he repeated.
"Come on, darling", Alina said gently. "I'll be fine. It's just a few minutes; I'll be quick."
Erik bit his lip in frustration, then nodded and let Jack lead him outside, gently closing the front door behind him. "What is it? Are there any complications?"
"No, none at all, yet. Too early for complications. Since you've both been naturalized, this might go over quite smoothly. I just wanted to see how you're doing."
"Fine", Erik replied.
Jack looked at him for a minute. "Erik, I'm your friend."
"Not fine", Erik admitted after a short pause.
"I was scared to death all night. Still am", Jack said gently. "Haven't been this scared in years."
"Yes", Erik looked away. "Still am."
"But you did a massively heroic thing. The right thing. And it can't have been easy. And if we're lucky enough to see the best outcome, it will be because of you."
Erik looked at Jack, then away again, then rubbed his eyes with his fingers. "Where is Preston now?"
"Oh, I left him to cool his head in custody, but he'll be out sometime today. However, he was strongly advised to find someplace to sleep away from this part of the island. I suspect he'll take me seriously."
"Thank you, Jack. This… is all thanks to you." he sighed.
"Don't worry about it. You're all dear to me. I wouldn't let you get hurt", Jack smiled.

Erik looked at him. "You wouldn't let us?"
"No."
"I can defend myself."
"Oh, I know. It's more out of principle. I just wouldn't be able to stand aside without meddling-" Jack's sentence got interrupted by Erik hugging him so tightly that it knocked the air out of his lungs; only for a split second before he let go again and continued as if it never happened.
"I've been losing my mind", Erik finally admitted, rubbing his temples. "If I look away for a second, I'm worried there will be no one left to protect her."
"And now you see that it's not true."
"Yes." Erik nodded, then gestured at the door a moment before it opened and the sisters came out.
It was a lovely sunny day, warm and slightly wistful with the fast approaching of autumn. Amelija didn't have much time left in America; as soon as Nikola arrived they'd probably be leaving with the first available ship. Now, more than ever, she hated the thought of leaving Alina here.
"How did the police react when you just barged in with a gun and Preston with a bump on his temple?" Erik asked. "I don't expect that situation to be damning to him."
"Ah, to be honest, they just groaned. As soon as they saw who was with me, and in what state, nothing surprised them." Jack shrugged.
"Oh, so that's why they looked so annoyed", Amelija pondered.
"You'll have to testify", Jack said. "You, Alina, and Erik too if possible. Amelija saw what happened, but I'm not sure it would be enough without your testimony. When they see the bruise on your neck it will erase any doubts."
"It's not much of a bruise", Alina shrugged.
"It's evidence, and that's what we need. You don't have to go today if you're still in shock - but I'd go tomorrow if I were you. Before your bruise starts to heal, and while all the details are still fresh."
"Alright", Alina said. "I will tell them the truth. I've got nothing to hide. And then what?"
"Well, then you can sue him for compensation - or not. In any case, it will be marked on his record - which, apparently, already contains several events like this one."
"I don't particularly like that option", Alina admitted. "I don't care about Preston's money. It'll only hurt his wife and kids if they're stripped of what

little they have. On the other hand, I do want him far away, and this testimony will serve as a good example of what he's capable of. One day, perhaps very soon, we'll have enough evidence to take his children away even if his wife keeps denying everything."
"Is that so?" Erik chimed in. "So Preston was right? He told me you were trying to turn Walter against him."
"That is... not true. I've spoken to Samuel and hinted at the possibility of taking them away from their father, but he was supposed to keep the younger kids out of it - his and Hank's testimony would be enough. However", she raised her hand, "I did go visit Walter, but I never told him to turn against his father or anything remotely like that. I told him he's a smart boy and he still has multiple options in life, and that I will respect him no matter what he chooses."
"You did what?" Jack fumed.
"How was I supposed to know his father would go into a frenzy over that? Had I known, I might have just told Walter to run away from home and we'd still be in the same situation, except he'd be free."
"You did manipulate him!" Jack groaned. "You didn't say what you wanted him to do, but you did know how he would react if you were acting like that -"
"Like what, Jack? Let's not beat around the bush. I'm the only person in the world who talks to him like she cares about him or what he wants. That's why he listens to me, and that's what his father is angry about, and probably why he pulled him out of school. And he can't change the fact I love Walter more than he does or that Walter loves me, no matter how long he forbids us from speaking. That's why he tried to attack me."
"Aside from the fact it was a dumb thing to do-" Jack tried again.
"For the last time", Alina hissed. "If you put me up to choose between a smart move and what I know is the right thing to do, I will choose the right thing every time. Some things I will not compromise on, and we'll continue to disagree until the day I die."
"You have obligations to people other than yourself!" Jack spat back at her. "To your employers, to me who has protected you since we met, to your family whom you're putting in danger-"
"I have an obligation to my children first and foremost!" Alina raised her voice. "Yes, it was a dumb thing that I did not expect Preston would find out and retaliate! I could have done it better, and protected us better- but

maybe you should ask yourself, and your friends in high places, why this was going on for so long in the first place! Why does someone you care about have to be put in danger for someone so horrible to be put away, while other people who had nobody to speak for them suffered for years? My obligation is to them as well, and always has been, and we won't bargain with that the way we bargain with everything else!"
"And I'm sure you'll be able to fulfill your sacred duty very well after you die by some random violent drunk's hand!" Jack burst. "I won't have this conversation with you now. Calm down and we'll talk again after you've found your common sense."
The rest of the walk was spent in very loud, stuffing silence, until they reached the crossing that led to Jack's house.
"Take care, all of you", Jack said, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "I'll be going home. No offense, I've had enough of both sisters for now. We'll talk sometime."
Both sisters looked away awkwardly in their respective directions.
"Take care", Erik said after him. He hadn't opened his mouth since the argument and spent the rest of the way home in silence with his mouth and shoulders stiff. Neither Alina nor Amelija could pinpoint what was wrong, but space seemed to curl around him in a sort of almost-visible dark cloud as he frowned beneath his mask.
Amelija decided she would like another walk alone while they resolved whatever they had to resolve among themselves. She excused herself, and Alina was left alone with silent, brooding Erik watching her as she entered the house and put her hat down.
Erik stared coldly at her, with a look in his eyes she only saw a few times in their year and a half together. She could recall the occasions, but couldn't quite pinpoint what the emotion was.
"What, what is it?" she asked.
He stared at her for another moment. "Your priorities bother me, darling, as much as I try not to let them bother me. I have been not letting them bother me since we've been together, which will be nine months in three days. It's a long time to be silent."
"My priorities have been the same since we met, which was twenty-one months ago, and since long before that", Alina replied, her voice getting colder.
"It's true, and it's fair", he drawled in a flat tone. "Technically. And yet,

since everything else has changed, it's slightly out of place."
"I see", Alina raised an eyebrow. "So, you have a problem with them now?"
"I do, in fact", he said, only slightly raising his voice. "I do, and I've spent a while now mulling it over, trying to discern if maybe I'm in the wrong. The truth is, I still don't know. But you will recall that I have been willing, all this time, to throw my priorities into the wind for you. I could have done so many, many reckless, stupid, dangerous, illegal things over the past year and I would not have batted an eye it would have been far easier and less troublesome for me, and I instead chose to go wherever you led me. I had my way of life and my agenda, and I nevertheless jumped wholeheartedly after you off that goddamn ship. I swore to you I wouldn't hurt anyone, wouldn't hurt myself, and I swore to myself I wouldn't let anything happen to you. I was willing to kill Preston on the spot to keep you safe, happy to spend the rest of my life chained in some prison cell in France if they didn't decapitate me on the spot, all for you; to keep you out of harm's way. And I decided not to do it, in the end, also because of you."
"And now, I'm finding still", his voice lowered again to a whisper with a burning fire in his eyes, "that your priorities, which are to your children first and foremost, do not include me in the same way mine include you."
Alina knew what that expression was, now. It was a look of betrayal.
"What do you want from me?" she demanded. "To abandon what I - we - stood for so far, for you? Because I'm yours now?"
"NO, Alina, goddamn it!" Erik finally burst, slamming his fist on the table. All of his careful composure and quiet demeanor were gone now. "I want you to keep yourself safe and not do the first thing that comes to your mind, not put yourself and me in danger over a child who's only one of the many you'll teach, not to sacrifice everything on a whim! I'm expecting what you've been goddamn expecting from me all this time - that you don't endanger yourself and don't self-destruct when you damn well please!"
Alina opened her mouth, but he interrupted again.
"Yes, because you're mine, goddamnit, as I am yours! One would think that would mean something to you! I want you to put me into consideration when you decide to do something that you think is morally right if it may put your life in danger!"
"And if I don't?" Alina whispered coldly.
"What do you think?" Erik shouted. "Have I so far made you do anything? Have I coerced, limited, manipulated, or blackmailed you in any way? Have

I threatened you? Scared you? What do you think I will do if you refuse to stop being so self-sufficient and willful and keep putting me among your lower priorities? I will stay by your side, because I'm asking you and not making you, and because I can't goddamn leave you! And I will be miserable! I will hate every second of it, knowing I'm giving everything for someone who is not willing to do the same!"
Alina looked at her hands.
Time stretched out as they sat in silence.
"You're right to say it", she whispered. "But where does it end?"
"What?" he managed.
"Where does it end? If I start hiding from danger, letting you decide what danger is - how long until I am simply… safer at home?" she was still looking at her hands.
"You think I will use this to… trap you?" he shook his head. "I take that back. I don't think I can live with that if you think so. It… would be easier if you simply didn't care."
"I do", Alina whispered. A few shy tears rolled down her cheeks. "I love you. I want to marry you."
Erik thought for a second. "I- I had the same thought process some time ago. If you let someone affect you so much, where does it stop? How long until you are lost? I lost quite a bit of sleep over it."
"And?" Alina covered her mouth with her hand.
"I don't know. I decided to believe that you wouldn't ask me to lose myself. I -" he shrugged. "I'm not asking you to stop working or stop caring. I would never ask that; I'm just asking you not to" he trailed off and shook his head. "I've talked long enough. It doesn't matter. I didn't mean to make you cry."
"I'm sorry, I-" she wiped her cheeks. "It's true, I know it. I just need some time to think about it in peace."
"I understand." Erik nodded, stood up, and turned. He didn't stop until he reached the door to his room when he stopped as his hand hovered above the doorknob. He looked like he wanted to say something, but then he quickly opened the door, disappeared behind it, and locked it, before Alina could say anything.
Standing in his room, he could hear Alina talking quietly in Croatian. Amelija- she must have sneaked in through the window, and he was so upset he hadn't heard her. He wondered if she enjoyed the show; she might

simply tell Alina to leave him as soon as possible after hearing all that. That's a thought for tomorrow. I can't stop her if she decides to do it, anyway.
He tried curling up in his bed, but it wasn't right. First of all, his bed smelled like Alina's goddamn hair, which was normally beautiful but currently unbearable. Secondly, he felt like curling up somewhere more unreachable, somewhere tinier and even darker than his already pitch-black room. There was no way he would get out of the house now; he wasn't in the mood for leaving and was secretly still terrified something horrible might happen while he was gone.
Erik lowered himself to the floor and squeezed into the space under his bed. It wasn't that bad; only a little bit dusty. It reminded him of Antoinette's closet. There was just enough room for him to lay on his back with his arms at his sighed quietly, closing his eyes.
Hello, mother, he tried to recall Antoinette's face. I'd like you to know I'm growing.
How are you growing, Erik? He was thankful he could still remember her voice.
Well, I no longer put people I love in impossible situations, for example, and my hallucinations seem to be… dying out. I am alive and I am here, I am real.
Oh?
Yes, and I'd like to think I haven't done anything worth getting killed for today, even though I felt it in me - I felt the horrible panic of the ground being pulled out from under me, and I managed to hold on. In fact, for better or worse, I did exactly what I wanted to do, aside from a few… problems with my presentation. He opened his eyes.
That's great, honey.
Yes, I think it is. I'm not a killer, or tormentor of women, or a monster. I am nothing but myself, and I'm about to see if that will be enough.
The space under the bed was too narrow for him to curl up on his side. He kept laying there on his back, staring at the dark underside of his bed.
I feel… heartbroken. But I'm still real. This is the cleanest pain I've felt in my life. I'd be happy about it if I wasn't so goddamn sad.
"Good evening to you too", Amelija said sitting on Alina's bed, looking at her book and not her sister, as Alina stormed into her room and slammed the door. "You're having even more trouble, I see?"

"I-" Alina stopped, wondered if she should ask her how the hell she got there and when then sighed and threw herself on the bed next to Amelija. "I am, yes, from all sides it seems."
"I'm sorry, Alina", Amelija said. "About these men having all these opinions for you to hear. Not that I think they're wrong; they do have a point, but I will not judge you if you want to spite them on principle."
Alina sighed, giving up her internal battle. "How did you get here? And when?"
"Oh, not long ago, a few minutes perhaps. Things were already quite lively when I arrived. And, anyway, through your window."
Alina sat on the bed next to her, pouting visibly. Amelija closed her book and patted Alina comfortingly on the shoulder.
"You were right. We should have been spinsters with cats."
"I never said that", Alina laughed. "You made that up."
"It can still happen, technically", Amelija remarked, lightly punching Alina's shoulder in mock excitement. "We can still just vanish without a trace and become, I don't know, pirates! Or bandits in the Wild West! Maybe controversial artists? How's your aim these days?"
Alina kept it in for a few seconds, then let out a quiet laugh. "I can't live without that goddamn bastard."
"Argh," Amelija growled. "Alright. Fine. At least they're both interesting. And neither of them are... you know."
"True."
"What is all this marriage business? I don't recall you inviting me to any engagement ceremonies, or telling me anything, or bragging with any rings", Amelija demanded. "You just both started talking like you're getting married all of a sudden without any context."
"Well, I don't know when it will be. Whenever we decide to do it. It will probably be as impulsive as everything else we've done so far. As for the rings, we'll just buy them on the way, I suppose?"
"Oh, my God. O,h God. Context made it worse. Mom is going to have a stroke", Amelija pulled at her scalp. "How did he even propose to you? When?"
"Recently, although, not quite officially."
"For what it's worth, he does love you. I do believe him, that he'd rather be miserable than forcing you to do anything- I quite liked the part where he yelled about how he can't leave you, very operatic", Amelija shook her

head, laughing very quietly as if Erik could hear her, understand Croatian, and get offended. "Anyway, he's acting a lot more… normal than I expected? I thought something broke in him last night when Preston attacked you, but apparently, it grew back remarkably fast, and somewhat different."
"Yes, he's a lot less fragmented than he was", Alina replied, focused on her train of thought. "I- hate to say it, but yes, if I can ask him to think about me before he acts, he can ask the same of me."
"I know you hate that you can't go into an all-out war over some kid you met a year ago, but for what it's worth, you'll help many more kids this way, if you learn to play your cards wisely."
"That's not how I work", Alina shook her head. "I give everything and have nothing to lose. That's why these abusive maniacs like Preston used to steer clear of me- they knew I had nothing to lose and would make their lives hell. Would I have even met Erik if I wasn't ready to risk everything for what is right? It worked with getting rid of dad, too, and many other times. Now, it's useless. Things have changed."
"So? You'll have to find different methods that don't include document forgery and manipulation. You'll have to adapt. Don't whine. Everyone does."
"And you're an authority on personal growth, all of a sudden?" Alina frowned at her.
"Precisely. So, what's the lawful, don't-get-yourself-killed way to get Preston far from his family and those he could hurt?"
"Law." Alina sighed. "I could try and sue him myself, for assault. I could report the abuse of his family to the police and raise enough hell that they have no choice but to listen."
"Would it work?"
"Well, since Walter fixed his grades and is no longer a delinquent but a promising young man, and the police already have the report from last night, if the school supports my claims then yes, it will be impossible to ignore. Frankly, in my opinion, stupid and ill-behaved children also deserve to live safely as well as promising ones, but I'll take any advantage I can get to help him."
"I hope you get along better with your superiors here than you did in London", Amelija remarked.
"Ah, I do. I do. I learned as much. Jack will also support me, and his money

is tied into it."
"I don't doubt it, but I will still advise you to apologize to him first."
"Argh", Alina kicked off her shoes and cocooned herself into her blanket. "I'll apologize to everyone tomorrow, alright? Let me sulk for at least a few hours. Good night."
Amelija woke up uncharacteristically early in the morning and shook Alina lightly as she groaned in her sleep.
"Princess", she said. "I'm going out. You and your lover have until I come back to act normal, or so help me God. I will move in with Jack out of wedlock so I don't have to see you both pouting at each other. Goodbye."
Erik saw her enter the kitchen, and quickly averted his eyes- he could never quite look at her after they'd been fighting. It was too intense a way to find out what she thought of him. He nodded and put a pot of coffee on the stove.
"Good morning", Alina said softly. She wasn't looking at him, either. He didn't know if he was relieved or ready to panic because of it.
Erik nodded one more time, forcing himself to mumble something resembling good morning.
"Can you make some for me as well?" Alina asked.
Erik poured some more water into the coffee pot.
"Should I make fish and potatoes for dinner tonight?" Alina asked, looking at a flower vase directly opposite where Erik was.
"Whatever you'd like."
"Would you like it?"
"I'll be thankful either way." The water boiled; Erik took two little porcelain cups Alina liked especially and poured coffee into them, then sugar, passed one of them to her, still not looking at her.
"Hmm", she mused. "We'll see."
After some thinking, Erik sat down at the table with her. He wondered if she'd look nervous when he sat close to her, after the scene last night. She didn't, at least not that he could tell.
"I'd like to clarify something I said to Jack last night", Alina started. She was used to resolving things directly, after all, and this was all becoming unbearable. "When I said my first obligation was to my children- that's still true, in a way. I don't see you as an obligation, I never have. I would not have wanted you if I saw you as another obligation in my life. I wanted you because I love you, and I was always free to choose you."

"Flattering, but-"
"Let me finish. We can make this work- I can make this work, to be precise, I will do what you ask of me. I will take care of myself, and of you, and I will learn where to draw the line between my work and my entire life. But I will not do it because I'm changing that duty to another one. I will do it. I love you because I am free to love you, and I want to make you happy."
"I see", Erik said carefully. He was thankful that he sat next to her and not across, so he didn't have to look directly at her. Was it enough, then? Was it? Is this it, did it work? Is it enough? Is there a catch-
"I love working with children so much", Alina continued. "It's my life's calling, and my life's duty, and I know you understand that. I love that feeling - that you've changed somebody's life for the better, that you're doing the right thing, that you matter to them. But I love you in a completely different way. I love you because you're mine, and because you see me, as I am, not just a teacher - but if I started to list all the ways and reasons I love you, it might take forever. You're the most important person in my life."
Erik finally looked at her. "Please tell me if I make you miserable."
"No, no, that would never happen-"
"Please tell me if it happens."
"Alright, I will. I will tell you if it happens. You don't have to worry about it." Alina smiled a little. She set down her coffee cup. Erik still hadn't touched his.
He looked at her intently for another second or two.
Then he reached out and pulled her into an embrace so forceful and tight that it knocked the air out of her lungs; Alina laughed in response and threw herself into his lap, throwing her arms around him.
"I would've died every time I had to leave this house, knowing someone might come and hurt you when I'm not here", he mumbled into her shoulder.
"I'll try to prevent that from happening. I'm not keen on dying, either", Alina gently remarked.

Chapter 45: Reaching Out

Alina went to the station to testify early the next day. Her neck was still bruised, and her demeanor still uneasy and quiet, so the policemen didn't doubt her at all. They did ask her why Preston attacked her in the first place, what her relationship was with Walter, and several details she didn't think would matter and didn't remember that well - she told them everything truthfully, and the whole thing was over rather smoothly and painlessly. One of the policemen later commented that she was "a sweet young lady".

Erik had a much harder time.

He knew he had a crucial part in all of this, and without him appearing to confirm Alina's testimony the whole story would have stood on shaky legs. If it wasn't for Alina - Alina's safety, Alina's student, Alina's happiness - he would've sooner thrown himself into the sea and swam back to Paris than willingly entered a police station. Jack went in with him and waited for him just outside the room without even asking him beforehand - he just appeared at his door that morning and asked him if he was ready. Erik's hands were shaking so badly he tried to keep them out of sight as much as he could, his voice took all of his attention to keeping from trembling; afterward, he could barely remember anything that happened that morning aside from his testimony that he'd learned verbatim the night before. Without his new, fake papers and Jack's connections, he was quite sure he would not have come out of that station, at least not without cleaving his way out. They were suspicious, and they didn't like him, and they made it very obvious. They asked about the mask, because of course they did; one young policeman hinted at him that he would be more trustworthy if he took it off. Erik ignored all of the insinuations as Jack advised him, and simply told the truth about what happened. He was prepared for all of this - his papers were pristine and his story matched all of the others. He anticipated there would be suspicion and prodding at some point in his life

here, and so back when Jack filed his papers he'd sought out the doctor who had set his arm a year ago. After some coercion, the doctor wrote him a note saying he was required to wear the mask for "medical reasons" and was "advising any authorities to let him keep it on at all times"; the rest was medical talk written in incomprehensive handwriting. Erik was grateful for it: he didn't want to read what the word for it was, and was grateful that not every diligent policeman could read it either. They were still suspicious even after seeing the doctor's signature, but he offered the doctor's address so he could testify as well, and they settled down.

After that, it became a routine investigation again.

"Is it over?" Erik asked quietly on his way home.

"Not for Alina", Jack replied. "For you… perhaps. The worst of it, at least. I'll try to keep you out of it." He felt a little bit relieved that Erik's hands at least weren't shaking as much anymore, and that he overall didn't look like he was just getting ready to be guillotined. Jack consciously knew that nothing would happen and that Erik was overreacting out of some fear known only to him, but Jack still found it hard to watch it happen.

"I'd like it to be over", Erik said, looking up at the sky. He was so sleep-deprived, his body ravaged with adrenaline, that the clouds and trees seemed to flutter before his eyes. "I'd like to sit down."

"You can rest", Jack said, not catching the very literal meaning of that statement. "If anything happens, I'll let you know in time."

"Unless you decide to get on a boat and leave for southeast Europe", Erik commented at one particularly colorful cloud as he tried to walk in a straight line. He was quite sure the cloud was supposed to be white, which was somewhat concerning. Jack didn't seem to notice anything unusual.

"What?" Jack turned to him. "Who told you that?"

"Nobody tells me anything, but I'm not stupid."

"I'm not set to leave", Jack frowned. "I don't even know if I'm wanted there at all."

"Oh, I have a hunch."

"And even so, I wouldn't leave without tying up loose ends I have here."

"It would be bad for business if you did."

"And I wouldn't leave you without saying goodbye."

"Hopefully you will all start talking to each other before that", Erik remarked. "Listen. Are you alright?"

"Fine enough."

"None of this concerns you at all?" I'm fainting, please notice- no, I'm trying to be a good friend, but I'm also fainting, please notice either of those -

"It does. But I've been through all this before. I know how to play the system to protect the people I care about. You're lucky Preston is just one violent drunk and not, you know, a whole criminal organization set on taking control over the entire city."

"I wonder if they're hiring," Erik smiled.

"Unlikely. There's very few of them left alive and free after what we did back in the day."

"I'm sorry you have to deal with all of this", Erik stumbled. "No, wait, you're nice to deal with all of this- I'll miss you once you're gone. I wonder what Croatia is like? I might never see it, or I might after all. Their music is so interesting, everything is in some obscure minor key. It would be funny if we met again there, of all places."

"What on Earth are you on about?"

"Well, the little snake-woman will keep you waiting until the last moment, won't she? She'll wait until you give up, and then she'll realize what she's about to lose at the last minute. It's so hard to decipher what she thinks underneath all of her pretenses. But you didn't see her skulk around the house and brood as I did. She loves you."

"Well, it doesn't matter, she can still refuse-"

"Ah, she won't. I don't know what to tell you - I know what I would do in your place, but don't do that. Listen, I think my nerves are at their end. I haven't slept in how long has it been? I'm seeing fireworks. You've done so much for me, Jack, and I'm grateful, but I might have to get home quickly unless you want to carry me the rest of the way there."

To his credit, Erik did get to his house on his own two feet, and the fact Jack had to unlock the front door because Erik's hands were shaking too much and he couldn't see was never mentioned again - or the fact he stumbled so much he hit his shoulder on the doorframe and stubbed his foot against the table leg without even noticing it. He threw himself on the bed without a single word to his fiancee, who simply sighed, drew the curtains on, and closed the door behind him.

The door was never locked when Piotr was expected; no one would dare stand in his way like that. It was blasphemy and a crime, then, that the door was locked now, and it outraged him so much that instead of knocking politely as his mother taught him, he banged with all the strength of his tiny hands and yelled,

"Alina! Alina! Open the door! I want to see you!"

"What? What is it, honey?" Alina opened quickly, her dish rag still in her hands.

"I want to see you!" Piotr exclaimed. "Why is your door locked? My mommy went to do some things and said I should come here so I'm not bored. Also, Jack left this for you. Why is your door locked?"

"Well, honey, apparently it's safer to have it locked occasionally. What's that?" She squinted at the letter in Piotr's hand.

"It's for Erik! Jack says nobody can open a letter that's for someone else. Did you know that? You can only open letters that have your name!"

"Oh, that's interesting! Why is that?" Alina cocked her head to the side, pouring lemonade for Piotr who was pacing around the room with the envelope still in hand.

"I don't know!" he said. "Why?"

"It's not nice- it means you're prying. If you want to know someone's secrets, then you have to ask them yourself."

"Where is Erik? Why isn't he home?" Piotr asked.

"He is, honey. He's sleeping in his room."

"I have to give him his mail! It's important!" Piotr said, confidently storming off to open the door to Erik's room (which wasn't locked, for better or worse, as its inhabitant crashed before he could lock it), and climbing directly on Erik's bed with equal peerless enthusiasm. Erik twitched a little when the ray of light entered his room, put his hands on his face automatically, then relaxed when he realized he'd fallen asleep with his mask on.

"Good morning, little knight", he remarked as Piotr climbed over his back, offering him the letter. "So, you're the one they sent to wake the sleeping beast?"

"You have a letter! Why are you still asleep? Why do you sleep so much?"

"Because I procrastinate sleeping... until I'm so tired... that I have to make up for it all at once", he replied through his pillow.

"That's stupid."

"Thank you for your input, sir knight", Erik turned around and Piotr shifted until he was sprawled over his chest and stomach, holding the letter out to him. "Alright, I'll read the stupid letter. Give it to me."

"Hmm." his shoulders stiffened as he skimmed over it, and he sighed. "Oh. I might be in trouble."

"What?" Alina peeked through the door. "Why would you be in trouble?"

Erik sighed again and passed her the letter.

"You can't read his letters", Piotr reminded her solemnly, still sitting on Erik's chest.

"She can if I'm the one giving it to her", Erik remarked, looking at Alina. "Well?"

"Why would you be in trouble?" she frowned, reading again.

"My absence at the Conservatory has been noted over the past few days."

"You're not in trouble", she waved. "They're just worried. Oliver is worried that you haven't been around since he came back from vacation, and he made Heidel write it. I'm quite sure of it."

"Why do you say that? You can't know."

"Your soloists have expressed a concern… This absence is, I'm told, uncharacteristic for you… let us know if you've fallen ill or need an extension… and at the bottom, Oliver sends his regards and is eager to continue your work. I have a hunch", she folded the letter, passing it back. "You're not obligated to appear daily until the orchestra starts their rehearsals, are you? Heidel is unlikely to summon you until he needs you. Daniel is too self-absorbed. But Oliver is certain to notice your absence right away, and I'm inclined to think he'd get worried about you before he gets judgmental."

"I need to go to work today. I can't have him waiting for me. How long have I slept?"

"Um", Alina said. "You came home in the afternoon… the day before yesterday."

Erik sat up so quickly that Piotr barely managed to scramble and sit next to him on the bed. "I've been missing nearly all week!"

"I'm sure they'll forgive you if you tell them you had to save your fiancee-"

"I don't tell them what happens to me!" Erik looked horrified. "It's none of their business, nor do they care!"

"Oliver cares", Alina replied. "I think you should write back, say you're not feeling well, and take another day to rest. Then you can be exceedingly diligent and hardworking for the next few weeks to make up for it and prove you're still invested. And then everyone will forget about it. It's how it usually goes."

Erik threw himself back on the bed.

"I think you should stay with me", Piotr chimed in.

"It's alright. I haven't been to work either", Alina said. "I told them what happened and the other teachers divided my classes among them for this week. It's not going to be a problem - this is a valid excuse."

"Oh."

"I didn't want to leave you", she admitted. "I mean, not right away. Do you want lunch? I made stew. You must be starving."

"Yes, darling, bless you. I am starving", he thought about moving Piotr when he stood up, then instead decided to carry him to the kitchen under his arm as if he was a particularly loud handful of sticks.

"I've been thinking, I should probably eat more", he commented.

"Oh? What on Earth possessed you? I thought you hated it."

Well, if I waste away, who's going to take care of you? "I can feel myself getting weaker. Every new disaster leaves me thinner and weaker and more tired. I can't keep going like this and losing energy; I have plenty of things left to do."

"Very true, darling, and very wise."

By the late afternoon, after Erik had come to his senses, Yana finished all of her business and came to pick up her son; she didn't want to elaborate much on it but admitted to Erik under her voice that she was off to visit Anna Preston.

"Why?" he whispered back.

"She doesn't know how to live without her husband", she said plainly. "But I do."

"Good point", he was somewhat taken aback. "That's kind of you, I suppose. But you don't know her - won't she get offended?"

"She wasn't."

"Oh."

"People here should stick together more. Like back home. Life is easier that way."

"I suppose you're right."

"You're good?" Yana asked. "Alina told me. I think you will be better now. Both of you."

"Um", he looked away. "I'll ask you one day to elaborate on that, but not today."

"No", she replied. "I think you will see Prestons again. This isn't over. Get ready for it."

Yana's prophecies came true the very next day - Erik was lost in thought, revisiting his compositions before his return to work when he was interrupted by a loud, rhythmic knock on the door.

Erik thought he was losing his mind again for a moment as he opened his door and saw a face in his doorway that looked remarkably like Preston's when he knew damn well Preston was cooling his head on another part of the island right now - he sighed a little sigh of relief when he recognized Hank Jr., whom Alina once pointed out to Erik as Preston's eldest son.

"Good afternoon, sir", Hank's voice was fairly quiet and flat compared to his father's tendency for snapping. His eyes looked tired.

"Good afternoon…?" Erik stood stiffly in the doorway, his entire body alert in case the young man decided to do something stupid.

"I'd like to talk to you, sir, if that's okay", Hank recited, with the same air of tiredness and defeat about him.

"I suppose", Erik replied, not moving. A very uncomfortable silence spread between them for a second.

"Can I come in?" Hank asked. His tired eyes barely wandered around Erik's mask; he looked him straight in the eye and showed no sign of fear or apprehension.

This young man has seen things. There is nothing I can do that would surprise or intimidate him.

"No", Erik blinked in sincere confusion. "Do you take me for a fool?"

"Fair enough", Hank said plainly. "You think I'm here to do something bad. I'm not. But we can talk outside if you want."

Erik stepped out without a word, closing the door behind him. A subtle wave of his hand before he stepped outlet Alina know she wasn't supposed to come into sight until he determined what was going on.

"I'm listening", he walked a few steps and turned to Hank, keeping his hands in his pockets. Hank didn't seem to have any weapons on him, as far as Erik could tell, and he was still significantly smaller than him - Erik could incapacitate him in seconds, just in case, if he wanted to.

But he didn't. He felt bad for the kid. He was once eighteen too, tired and disappointed in the world and its adults.

"My mother sent me here to ask you to drop the charges and let my father go free", Hank recited in one long sigh. "She's afraid of what will happen to us - especially the youngest ones - if we don't have a head of the house to provide money and keep the discipline. She's willing to do anything, or so she says, to repay you for the offense our father has caused."

"Huh", Erik said. "Don't you and your brothers work? And your mother as well?"

"We do", Hank said. "If anything, our father was spending more than he was earning. It's all just her fears and her devotion to him."

"I see", Erik said. "And you want me to risk my own family's safety to appease your mother's fears after your father has made it clear he wouldn't hesitate to hurt my fiance?"

"No, I don't", Hank shook his head. "I promised her I would give you her message, and I did. But I never promised I wouldn't give you my own opinion as well - I think my father is better off in jail, and we're all better off without him. Not to mention we can't afford to repay you anything worth mentioning. Mother is scared and lonely, but the rest of us have been breathing freely for the first time in years."

"That's pragmatic of you", Erik managed.

"I don't know what pragmatic means, sir. Anyway, in this family, we've always looked out for one another - all of us, together. But our father - he's been hurting us more and more and helping us less and less over the years, and at this point, I have to sacrifice him to save the rest of us."

"I got a different impression from your brother", Erik mumbled, too shocked by that rant to add anything else.

"Walter? He's still a kid. He has a hard time accepting that our dad won't change after all. He'll love him to death one day, then hate his guts the next. He hasn't been around as long as I have", Hank shrugged. "Father was like this long before he had any of his usual excuses. He will never change. We all deserve to be without him, and if I may give you another opinion, all of my siblings including Walt will fare much better without a constant threat over our heads. Walter is angry now, but he's already becoming less snappy around the house. Dan and Mary have been playing and singing freely. Sam might start chasing girls now that he's not constantly on edge."

"I see", Erik said. Hank's behavior was starting to make sense, and even though Erik didn't let himself relax just yet, he wasn't as tense as he had been a few moments ago.

Another silence spread between them as Hank was expecting him to say something else.

"I'm, well, I'm glad you're all doing better, I mean-", Erik tried, hoping he wasn't saying something offensive, especially since his fight with Preston had little to do with anyone but Alina on his part.

"What are you going to do, sir?" Hank interrupted, too impatient to listen to platitudes.

"I won't drop the charges", Erik said after a long moment of staring into the distance.

"Ah", Hank's visible relief was more than a little unsettling to him. "Well, thank- thank you? I guess. It's weird to thank you for putting my dad in jail, but here we are."

"I don't know if he will go to jail. But it's entirely possible, with his history and the school's reports of Walter being abused, that he will lose any right to see any of you or live with you anymore. I'm sorry, I'd like you to think it's all for you, but that would be dishonest". Erik shook his head. "I wish all

the best to your family, I truly do, and I want to help you however I can, but there's another, more pressing, aspect to this. If your father gets out without any punishment, he might try to go after Alina again - and, again, sorry, but if she's in danger I don't care what any of you have to say. If your family gets in any financial or legal trouble because of what I've done, I'll do my best to help you. I'll pay for Walter's school if needed, or anyone else's. But I won't let your father walk free for as long as we're living in this part of New York."

"Sounds fair", Hank nodded. "Sam has also hinted to me the school might report dad for what he's been doing to Walter- that it's enough for some of us to witness for him to be out of our hair completely and lose custody forever. Is that true?"

"Alina said so?"

"Yeah, I can't think of anyone else who'd fill Sam's head with that. Pretty sure dad figured it out, too."

"Then it's true, on her part. She's capable of suing him herself to keep you all safe. I doubt she'd ask you to testify if you didn't have to."

"That doesn't bother me", Hank said, obviously lying.

"No?"

"I've thought about it", Hank raised his chin at Erik defiantly. "I don't know if it's the right thing to do, but it doesn't bother me anymore. I will go there and I will tell the truth - and I'll let smarter men than me decide what is right. But I will tell the truth."

Erik nodded respectfully.

"It'll break my mom's heart, but at least it won't break her bones, which is more than a little improvement", Hank added. Erik wasn't sure if Hank thought his remark would be funny or expected him to laugh; the corner of Hank's mouth curled upwards, but his eyes remained steely, cold, and tired.

"There's just one more thing, now that I'm already here", Hank added, his face softening into something resembling an insecure young boy, for a change. It was almost scary how much it didn't suit him.

"Would you really pay for Walter's high school - or college or wherever they want to send him - if Mom lets him go now that she might get sole custody?" he tried tentatively; he didn't think he'd get any sort of definite answer but it was something worth checking now that it was brought up.

"Consider it done", Erik said without thinking.

Hank blinked at him.

"What? I'll sign it if you want to. We'll arrange a non-refundable scholarship for him. He'll be settled for as long as he needs it."

"That's not - we'll pay it off, or work, we don't need charity -"

"Scholarships are not charity."

"What are they?"

Erik thought for a long time. "I'd say investment, though that sounds cold. But I think that's what they are. The school would invest a certain amount of money into Walter, counting on him making use of his knowledge and contributing to society."

"And if he doesn't?"

"I think that depends on the contract, but I don't know. Alina knows these things. But for Walter, we'd try to arrange that he doesn't have to return anything even if he fails or abandons his education."

"That's a gamble, then, sir."

"It's trust. On our part. Or both parts. You'd be better off asking Alina about any details."

Hank looked at him for a long time, searching for something in Erik's eyes. "Fine", he finally said. "I'll allow it. Mother won't protest as long as you don't take him too far away."

"You'll have to arrange it with Alina. I'm not strictly connected to the school or Walter's education at all. Jack and I are just occasional benefactors, in the financial sense."

"Yes, I've heard of Mr. Franklin's and your benefitting", Hank laughed a short laugh at him. "Thanks. I appreciate that not all folks who come across a little bit of money are so desperate to hoard it."

"Um", Erik shifted, scratching his temple. "I think I should go now. Do you need to say anything else?"

"No, sir", Hank straightened, his face turning to stone once again. "Except, well, thank you."

Erik would've snuck into the Conservatory as quietly as possible had it not been for the fact he would have to talk things out with Heidel first. He knew it would be polite (he knew it because other people told him), but he still dreaded it. Reasonably, there was little chance that Heidel would take this opportunity to make his life miserable; and yet, there he was, rehearsing his lines once again as he took the steps to the third floor.

He expected Heidel to be angry with him, and to wait for him in his office. He didn't exclude the possibility of others, especially Oliver, being angry about his disappearance and their missed appointments.

He didn't expect all three of them to be there in Heidel's office and start talking simultaneously when he entered.

"Giry!" Heidel exclaimed as soon as he appeared in the doorway, immediately standing up. Daniel sat in his chair silently, but his face transformed completely when Erik entered; Oliver leaned forward and smiled.

"Where have you been?"

"Are you alright?"

"We were worried!"

"Next time, you could simply write us a note…"

Erik froze in place, his hand still on the door handle, wondering if he should just turn around. "I'm sorry…?" he said, quietly so Dan and Heidel didn't hear him until Oliver, whose hearing was much better, banged his cane on the floor several times.

"Gentlemen. We're being rude. Our friend was ill, and now we're hounding him the second he arrives. Perhaps we should let him take a breath."

Erik finally let go of the door handle and clasped his hands in front of him. "Thank you, Oliver. I was indisposed against my will, and I'm genuinely sorry for not telling you earlier. We can continue rehearsing now if you'll still have me. I can promise it won't happen again."

Heidel and Daniel opened their mouths again, and Oliver either heard it or deduced it through some sixth sense, because he lifted his index finger in a warning and they both immediately went silent.

"Fritz would like you to know it's your production, and he has no intention of controlling how you run the rehearsals. He only expressed his wish that you tell him on time when you're not coming so that he can organize his work days accordingly. He also wishes you to know that he's gathered most of the orchestra for you, and will start the official rehearsals as soon as you decide it's time."

"Uh", Erik looked at Heidel. "Really?"

"It wasn't that hard", Heidel smiled at him, cleaning his glasses against his jacket. He finally realized he was still standing and sat down. "The students expressed genuine curiosity in your symphony, especially when I remarked they would be more-or-less free of my influence during that time."

"Well, not quite, we still need a conductor-"

"I've got that covered", Heidel put his glasses back on. "My conducting students will be taught alongside your orchestra, taking turns with them. Whoever you decide fits your vision best will conduct the performance."

"Is that something your students are used to? Hearing instructions from several different people alternatively?"

"Don't worry. The conducting students will still be getting instructions from you and me, and will coordinate among themselves."

"I see." Erik paused. "Thank you, sir. I am sorry for being away all this time. It was out of my control."

"Ah, forget it", Heidel waved his hand, softened by a sincere apology. "Don't do it again."

"I won't."

Oliver raised a finger again, this time in Erik's direction. "Daniel wishes you to know he missed you and was worried you'd abandoned him just when he was getting some wind in his wings."

"I didn't say that?" Daniel turned to him, getting red in the face. "I just said we should check where he is, instead of just coming here every day and waiting like fools."

"Same, same but different. I filtered out your moody gibberish and decided to give him the gist of it."

"I wouldn't do that", Erik sounded slightly offended.

"Didn't say you would", Daniel replied, embarrassed.

"Well, thank you for waiting, anyway. I'll be here from now on." Erik didn't quite know what to say, and Daniel looked like he wanted the conversation to end as soon as possible.

"What happened to you, Erik?" Oliver finally burst with impatient curiosity. "I know someone this pedantic didn't simply forget to show up for a week,

so what happened? Are you ill? Is this tempo too straining for you?"

"I'm fine now", Erik looked at his hands. Nobody, in the whole commotion, had remembered to offer him to sit, and the whole interrogation was getting unnerving.

"Tell me if you're still sick! It's not embarrassing! I was in this situation, and I was too afraid to tell people there was something wrong with me until I ended up in a hospital! Wouldn't it be better to set a more reasonable schedule?"

"You're mistaken", Erik looked up in disbelief. "I'm really fine. It was just a passing ailment."

Oliver frowned.

"It's not easy to explain", Erik admitted. "Someone I know was in severe danger, and I had to take care of her - and after the danger passed, I lost consciousness and didn't wake up for two days. If that makes any sense."

"Alina?" Daniel said from his corner. "Is she okay now?"

"She's alright. Slightly distressed, but will be fine."

"And you?" Daniel added, seeing Erik glare at him.

"About the same." He turned to Oliver. "I'm sorry. I would prefer not to go into details for now."

"It's fine. I'm satisfied", Oliver nodded. "If anything else happens, let us know if we can help." He stood up, confidently leaving the room for Erik to follow. Daniel shrugged, picked up his violin case, and followed after them. Nobody announced that they'd start all having rehearsals together; it was understood, just as it was understood that from that day on they would all consider each other friends.

Chapter 46: Meg

Opera Garnier, Paris

Ten years ago, summer of 1885

Antoinette was having the worst of days.
Some days were simply like that - her ballerinas weren't listening to her, instead complaining about the heat and the exhaustion; everyone was cranky and arguing, some floors didn't have running water due to construction and repair, and so her (very thirsty) dancers had to walk down two flights of stairs during breaks to be able to drink and then walk back up to continue the rehearsals. Everyone was just waiting to be sent off for the summer and left alone. Even Meg, who was only nine years old and normally a well-behaved, reasonable child had decided to watch the older ballerinas was not enough for her and wandered off somewhere into the depths of the enormous, dark building.
Antoinette remembered a whole array of curses her late husband taught her after his time in the army as she ran about in futile attempts to locate her missing child.
"Jean", she called after the receptionist. "Jean, have you seen my daughter?"
"No, madam", he stood up. "Do you need help finding her?"
"No, I'll find her, you stay there. If you happen to see her, keep her here until I'm back", she yelled after him as she sped away.
Meg was having the worst of days.
Her mom had been yelling and bossing everyone around all day long; in that tired, annoyed voice Meg hated. Meg had learned long ago that there was no appeasing mom when she was like this; no matter what good she did mom would stay tired and mad, and others in the Opera would keep snapping their stupid remarks at them both, and she would simply have to wait it out and try not to annoy her further until the end of the day. While Mom tried her best not to snap at Meg in particular, and Meg could see the

effort, Meg was far too smart and far too sensitive not to notice how little patience everyone had for her these days. Meg's school year was over two whole weeks before Opera closed its season for the summer, and she had been looking forward to watching the adult ballerinas practice (her ballet lessons were still simple exercises that looked nothing like finished productions), meeting everyone and getting spoiled by attention. The attention, in particular, lasted for a few days - Meg was particularly fond of one teenage ballerina who showed Meg her pointe shoes and secretly gave her one of the feathers from her costume - until everyone got so busy with wrapping up their work they hardly paid any more mind to her.
She was bored and slightly hurt. Disappointment stung. All these people seemed so nice a week ago.

Meg wandered through the empty hallways of the upper floors and made her way down; nobody was eager to be inside any more than necessary due to the heat and lack of running water. She had all the time in the world to explore the scary mysterious building.

(Meg was, even then, nearly impossible to scare with anything faint-hearted people considered frightening. Part of it may have been the fact she'd never seen her mother afraid of the dark or of scary big men, and so fear quickly became a feeling she didn't take all that seriously. She would later in life be very grateful for that fearless quirk in her personality, for she would have otherwise probably suffered a nervous breakdown from being raised by someone like Antoinette.)
Meg wandered the hallways, bored to death and annoyed until she came across a small broom closet she'd never seen open before. Curious, for whatever reason, she peeked inside and jumped away when she realized the closet had no back wall.
There was only darkness in the back. Meg shook a little, scared for a moment before she thought about it.
Mom had told her where the entrances to catacombs were and to keep away from them; this was not one of them. This was a secret corridor, yes, slightly cold and very dark - but it could well be just that, a secret corridor, and Meg was bored to death.
She carefully stepped inside. Nothing moved. No sound. The door was still open behind her, and friendly sunlight shone through the windows into the

hallway she came from.
Meg took a few steps into the dark, then a few more.
She could barely make out a tall, impossibly lanky, hunched shadow in the darkness several feet from her that turned and looked directly at her with glowing eyes before it lunged itself towards her. Meg was frozen in place with primal fear, too scared to scream as the figure approached impossibly fast and nearly completely silent.
The figure brushed with her in passing, pushing her slightly away towards the exit, and disappeared. Meg stumbled and saw a shining wire close to the ground in front of her. She managed not to touch it.

Meg wasn't easily frightened, but the thought of being alone with a monstrous figure in the dark was too much even for her, and so she sprinted out of the corridor and ran into the hallway, running until she reached a corner. She then stopped to take a breath and started thinking.
Mom would kill her for going into the dark alone. She was very adamant that Meg shouldn't do it, but why, she never said. Did she know about the mysterious figure? Was it a monster? Meg's mother was always honest, even too much so for a small kid like Meg, and never hid from her the true reasons why some things were forbidden. If there was a monster in the hallways, and mom knew about it, she would have told Meg. Antoinette herself was curiously not afraid of dark corridors and catacombs at all and scoffed at people who shuddered at the mention of them.
Meg peeked slightly from behind the corner. The secret door was still open, and nothing moved in the entire hallway. Her heart was still beating furiously, but curiosity got the better of her.
"Hey!" she yelled, gripping the wall tightly with her fingers. "Who are you?"
No answer.
"Are you some ghost or ghoul? Why are you haunting the corridors?"
No answer. Meg cast a glance behind her. Nobody was coming, and she found it strange that they didn't think to look for her. But, there would probably not be another chance like this.
The cold air was gently blowing from the corridor. Meg wondered if she'd imagined it all. A normal person would be too cold in that creepy corridor; only a ghost would survive. But the creature had had enough of a chance to kill or kidnap her if it wanted to; she'd been easy prey. And yet she was still

here.
"Aren't you cold in there? Why don't you come out?" she tried.
No answer.
"Fine!" Meg was growing frustrated. "You can avoid me too! If everyone here is so fed up with me already, I'll just tell mom to leave me at home!"
Now, that produced an effect. She heard rustling from the corridor and hid behind the corner again, but nothing happened. When she looked again, she saw a little bundle of paper on the floor of the hallway, halfway across to the secret entrance. It was a small paper bag, the kind people usually wrapped pastries in.
Meg mustered her courage and walked up to the bag, carefully opening it. It indeed held a small pretzel and a folded piece of paper. Meg thought about taking a bite of the pretzel, then decided against it and unfolded the paper. It was a drawing - she could recognize the secret entrance before her, and after that, there was a map with several more corridors and arrows pointing her to where she needed to go. It didn't seem to go very far; the basement was allegedly huge but the map only showed how to get to a little clearing two staircases down. There were some additional scribbles (spots with X drawn on them, presumably forbidden to stand on), but not a single word was written on the whole map.
"I'm not that stupid!" Meg yelled. "I'm not going to follow you into the dark!"
The silence seemed to agree with her. It would have been indeed stupid to follow a monster into the dark.
Something else flew out from the entrance; Meg flinched and then ran to pick it up. It was a little box of colorful chalk, six different colors.
"For me?" Meg wondered. "Really?" Now that was more like it; Meg loved drawing and would indeed make use of this toy while the rest of the theater was busy arguing with each other.

Meg was now feeling guilty. "I'm sorry I can't come. I can't follow this map in the dark."

A few seconds later, something lit up inside the broom closet. She ran to look.
Rows of candles were being lit across the walls; Meg didn't understand how as she couldn't see who or what was lighting them. Under the candlelight,

the corridor didn't look quite so scary - she'd heard rumors of skeletons and dead bodies and poisonous mold, but it looked like a normal stone hallway. Meg, hard to scare and bored to death, took a few steps into the cold corridor, but only after she propped the closet door behind her so it couldn't be closed.

Erik was having the worst of days.

A pipe had burst in the upper levels of the catacombs, drenching the lower parts and all of his possessions. It wasn't dangerous yet, but stepping through a good few centimeters of water was annoying to him in a place already uninhabitable by any normal standards; he was also not eager to find out what would happen if the water should rise. If only he could get the workers' or Antoinette's attention to show them where the leak was, it could all be over with fairly quickly and he wouldn't have to bother with it anymore or worry about potentially drowning like a rat in the catacombs. Antoinette, his only trusted company in this place, was busy with both work and her little daughter who was out of school and wandering the Opera house as it belonged to her for over a week now. Erik, insanely jealous, refused to admit to himself that he was at eighteen years old still juvenile enough to even feel insanely jealous; he tried to tell himself the little girl was annoying and distracting, and a menace, when she was none of that. Erik loved to watch Antoinette's ballet classes and chat with her after she was done with work; now the routine was ruined by this… polite, charming, clever, and outspoken child. He could honestly not find any rational reasons to hate the little brat, and it made him hate her more. She was the perfect little mirror of Antoinette with her fearless grey eyes and her serious disposition, and one little part of him instantly adored her as only an older sibling can adore a sweet younger one; the other part of him hated her as only an older sibling can hate a younger one taking up all of their mother's attention. Erik was big on rationality in those days, hoping it would save him from the horror, chaos, and disaster that ravaged his mind; but he could honestly not rationalize any of this to himself. He wandered down, defeated, furious and intent to go home and stop trying to get Antoinette's attention which only seemed to annoy her further. He had no way to talk to her alone and explain that no, he wasn't throwing a tantrum, it was urgent. As he heard the gentle hiss of a secret entrance close to him being opened, he could not rationally explain to himself the ferocity with which he hurled himself at the familiar blonde, a gray-eyed child about to unwittingly step

right into one of his traps. The whole thing happened before he had a chance to think: the child saw him and froze in fear, he managed to push her away from the trap and withdraw back into the shadow. He barely brushed against her before she sprinted away at the mere sight of him.
Erik panicked. This was not supposed to happen; neither he nor Antoinette had any sort of plan for this situation.
His heart melted a little when the kid asked him if he felt cold. (He did. It was always cold around him. He wore two to four layers of clothing in the summer, and he still felt cold deep in his bones. He lied about it to Antoinette, not wanting to worry her about something she couldn't control.) It melted a little more at Meg's admission of her boredom and loneliness. Erik, so sensitive to being rejected and ignored, could not physically live with himself if he caused a small child to feel the same because of him. And now he was leading the child through the catacombs. Well, that was one way to get Antoinette's attention.
He checked around to see if the girl could see him. He was still safe in the shadowy parts of the corridor; she could at best get a glimpse of him, nothing more. Her face was buried in his scribbled map, anyway.
"What are these things? Marked with X?" the kid asked, looking around.
"Traps. Be careful, it's not safe", he responded from the shadows before he could think about it.
The girl gasped. "You're real!"
Erik was now grasping at straws to keep being mad at her. "What?"
"You exist! You can talk!"
"I'm not real!" Erik panicked, his voice changing the whole register until it reached the pitch of a little boy. "Don't tell anyone about me!"
"I won't," Meg Giry replied, looking sincerely offended. "I'm not a snitch! You can ask anyone in my school!"
Erik panicked silently. The girl kept walking until she reached the end of the makeshift map.
"What is this place?" she turned around. "Why am I here?"
"Uh", Erik struggled to try to find words. It didn't occur to him that he'd have to talk to an actual child until now. "There's no water on the upper floors."
"I know", she said. "It's awfully hot." as much as she struggled, she couldn't pinpoint where the voice was coming from. And it sounded like a little boy, too, which was completely different from the lanky monstrous figure she

saw lunging at her earlier.
"Well, I know why that is. A pipe burst just next to where you're standing - see how the walls are damper there? It's leaking down below. Parts of the catacombs are flooded already. They don't know where to look, but this is where it is. You need to tell her."
"Tell who?" Meg frowned.
"Your mom", Erik barely managed, nearly heaving with jealousy. "They'll listen to her."
"Oh! Alright. I'll tell her." Meg looked around. "Is this where you live?"
"No. I'm not real. Don't tell them about me."
"I know, I know, but really - is this where you live?"
Erik was losing this battle with himself. And with the child. "I- no. I'm usually deep underground. But now it's flooding."
"Ah!" she finally understood.
"Get them to fix it, and you won't see me up here again", he concluded.
"Tell your mom."
"I will! Are you in danger? Are you going to drown?" she asked, her eyes darting across the corridors wide with concern.
Erik's heart couldn't handle it. "You have to leave now. This place is not safe. Show your mom the map."
"But-"
"No questions. I'm not alive, but you are, and you could die in here. Go, and don't come here again. The next time you hear a voice from a corridor, it might not be me. Don't trust them."
"Alright!" Meg replied, turning to go back. She was not easily frightened, but she was not stupid either. Hearing the fear in the disembodied voice raised the hairs on her neck. "Who else lives here? Why is it dangerous?" she whispered.
"Many monsters. I keep them under control some days, but not always. Promise not to come back."
"But I-"
"Promise me!" Erik raised his voice at the child who was now practically running back up. He couldn't stand the thought of the little girl coming to look for him, only to step on a trap or find a disheveled psychotic shell unable to tell hallucination from reality or -
"I promise!" Meg squealed. "Thank you for your help! I won't forget you! And for the crayons!" she ran out of the corridor entrance right into her

mother's arms. The sunlight in the hallway blinded her; she blinked trying to orient herself. Reality seemed too real.
"Marguerite!" Antoinette kneeled next to her, obviously furious. "Where on Earth have you been? Did I not tell you not to go into the basements?"
"Mom, listen!" Meg held up the paper. "This is where the leak is! Some boy was down there, and he showed me the way! We can have water now!"
"A boy?" Antoinette's voice wavered with inexplicable sadness. "You saw… a boy in the catacombs?"
"I only heard him, but he gave me this! He says the catacombs are flooding-" Meg covered her mouth in panic. "I promised not to tell! Mom, you can't tell anyone about him! Tell them you found it! Please! I promised!"
"It's alright, little bird", Antoinette hugged her. "You did well. We'll tell them we found it by accident; no one will harm your friend in the catacombs."
"Is he safe down there? He said there are many monsters in the catacombs."
"Ah, don't worry", Antoinette stood up and patted at her dress, then took her daughter's hand. "He's stronger than all of them, I promise."

Chapter 47: Pomp and Circumstance I

Nikola arrived on a cloudy, windy Autumn day secretly hoping he'd get a proper greeting with appropriate joy and delight at his arrival; he was so used to being away and lonely for months on end that people made a whole ceremony of his arrival something he already considered normal, even if he wouldn't admit it to himself. He got off the train slowly, admiring the advantages of a civilized society that he almost forgot about while hiking through the wilderness for several months.

Amelija waited for him at the train station alone, sitting with a sour face and umbrella in her hand just in case. Nikola felt a tinge of disappointment as he walked with his bags up to her. She didn't offer to help him out with the luggage, which made sense - she wasn't particularly strong - but it added to the overall unwelcoming impression he was getting.
"Good morning", he looked at her. "How are you?"
"Not great."
"I'm sorry for making you get up so early. You could have sent Alina." Why was nobody else happy enough about seeing him to even come and greet him properly?
"I wanted to talk to you. Alone.", Amelija stood up. "I have problems. I need advice."
"My advice?" Nikola frowned. "Could I possibly get some coffee and breakfast first?"
"Yes, yes, of course. I know a good coffee shop nearby."

"Aren't we going to Alina's house? I'd like to put down my bags-"

"Yes, yes, later. They're panicking about your arrival too much anyway - if we're late an hour or two they'll have just enough time to tidy up or for

Alina to make ice cream or whatever else she thinks of doing. You know how she's always all pomp and circumstance."
Nikola sighed. A little pomp and circumstance would have been nice.
"Right", Nikola nodded as Amelija led him through what seemed to resemble a little village rather than a suburb of a massive city, "so, at least it wasn't boring, I presume?"
"That's all you have to say?" Amelija fumed. "After everything I've told you?"
"It's a bit much to take in all at once", Nikola shrugged. Hey, I'm fine, I'm alive and well, I have a lot to tell you too. "So, the important thing is, you're in love."
Amelija said nothing.
"I'd say congratulations, but it feels out of place", Nikola mumbled. "Well, Amelija, has anyone told you that you like to overcomplicate very simple things?"
"I-" Amelija turned to him, furious again. "You're no help at all!"
"Good. You don't need my help. You need to get yourself together and take hold of your life. If you don't pick someone you want to marry, your parents will start having ideas that perhaps they should help you out with it, and you don't want that. Why are you so hellbent on missing this opportunity to live your own life on your terms for a change?"
"Because I don't know- I might be wrong!"
"Everyone is wrong sometimes, Amelija. That's just life. Your family is making decisions for you knowing full well they might be wrong. Why aren't you giving yourself that benefit?"
"But what if-"
"For God's sake, if you marry the American and he starts treating you badly I will personally swoop in and save you. I'll gather all of my male friends and cousins and we'll all have a chat with him, like the Italian mafia. Or, I'll sneak inside in the middle of the night and save you and you can bore me on my travels for the rest of eternity. Is that what you wanted to hear?"
"Yes", Amelija gritted through her teeth. "Yes, it is."

"Oh." Nikola raised his eyebrows at her, taking one of the cigarettes he'd rolled on his long train ride out of his pocket. "Well, there you have it."
Erik didn't know what to do with his hands or where to sit or if he should find somewhere else to be until all of this mess was finally over and all

these people finally got on their boat. He knew Nikola Boričević's coming was some sort of big event; if Alina's hurry in making pancakes and coffee wasn't enough to instill a sense of urgency in him, his anxiety at having yet more people in his house certainly was. But, as time passed, Alina made pancakes and annoyedly decided that if they had better things to do than to come to meet her, they were very welcome to do so without her breakfast. She curled up next to him, still mumbling about how Nikola should know better than to play favorites, and settled down. Erik enjoyed a few rare moments of peace in the early Autumn morning until the loud and cheerful knocking accompanied by loud and cheerful jabbering outside pulled him out of his comfortable daydreaming.

"Nikola!" Alina exclaimed as soon as she opened the door and threw her arms without any dignity around her cousin's neck like a child; the man laughed in response and hugged her so tightly he lifted her off her feet as he exclaimed, "Well, at least someone is happy to see me!"

"You're alive!" Alina pinched his cheeks. "Didn't get mauled by any bears?" The man was olive-skinned like Alina and very tall; with the same sharp nose and firm jaw as the rest of them, but eyes completely dark, framed with dark eyelashes. He had a somewhat wide frame but was thin and wiry as if he was built strong but weathered by long days in the wilderness. The skin on his clean-shaven cheeks and jaw was lighter than the rest of his face, indicating he was until recently probably not as shaven and not as clean.

"No bears this time, no", he shook his head. "Alina, you look great! Do I smell coffee?"

"You'd be smelling fresh coffee if you two hadn't decided to go eat breakfast without me and left me all alone like I don't matter to you anymore-"

"You don't", Amelija interrupted. "I'm joking. I wanted us to make arrangements for our ship first, get that out of the way. We're leaving in three days." while she was finishing her sentence, the man's gaze already searched over the room and landed on the only other person present.

"I'm Nikola Boričević; from the letters. You must hate me right now", the man flashed a brilliantly charming smile at Erik as he offered his hand, the corners of his dark eyes wrinkling slightly. "If Alina ever barged into the house where I live with my lover, I'd kick her right out the window."

Nikola's eyes moved, barely noticeable, across Erik's masked face with

interest, but he never said anything. Instead, his gaze fixed on Erik's eyes as he kept smiling at him.
Erik took his hand and shook it, deciding not to comment on anything. He did hate Nikola, only slightly, for the way he seemed to have a lifetime of stories with his fiancee, and a little more for the amiable way he was talking to Erik right now.
"Amelija asked me to come a little early and have coffee with her because she needs love advice. Why she thinks I care about her love life or give advice for that matter, I have no idea. But I've never let my dear cousins down, and I can't start now. I'll be out of your hair soon. I'm sorry, sir, how may I call you?" Nikola kept smiling at him, seeming completely undisturbed by Erik's cold behavior.
"Erik." he bowed his head ever-so-slightly before he realized what he was doing. I'm... not that easily charmed. Am I?
"Well, sir, - Erik, if I may", Nikola tilted his head at Erik, releasing the grasp on his hand. He put his own hands behind his back, looking at Erik with interest. When Erik didn't respond, he simply kept talking. "I'm very glad to meet you. It wasn't too much trouble to have Amelija stay for so long?"

"It wasn't, or I would have told her so myself."

"He really would have", Amelija chirped in a sweet voice, her eyes throwing daggers at Erik. "My gracious host would never bother himself with unnecessary politeness."
"That's what I thought too, until a few months ago", he replied with equal sweetness. "Alas, I had to adapt to survive my guests."
"Um", Nikola drawled, unsure what to think of all this. "Well, good to see you're getting along. Alina, is it possible to get any of your delicious coffee?"
"I'll smoke outside", Nikola announced after coffee and his second breakfast that day. The best part of an exhausting trip was getting spoiled after said trip. "I won't be ruining your lovely house with the smell. What are you three doing this evening? Are we having dinner anywhere?"
An avalanche of options erupted in Croatian from both Alina and Amelija for about five minutes, until the quiet man who had barely spoken until then (and sat patiently all through the gift-giving, story-telling, nagging and

bragging, and all the banter of people who have known each other for ages) got tired of waiting - he tapped on Alina's arm and said something very quietly to her; Alina immediately stopped talking to listen to him and Amelija waited with uncharacteristic patience. It was massively strange and even considerably awkward to Nikola, but the sisters didn't seem to find it unusual.
"Ah", Alina said. "That's fine if you're sure." she gave a barely noticeable gesture with her head and the man turned to Nikola again.
"I work afternoons and early evenings", he said.
"Oh! Of course, no problem at all! We'll wait, of course", Nikola hurried, misreading the room completely. Alina opened her mouth to say something, but the man tapped on her arm again.
"No", he continued, his eyes darting slightly from Nikola's face, "No, that's not necessary. I don't know how late I'll be, and in any case, I would prefer to meet you all later when I'm done." Not to mention he was not at all eager to sit in some unfamiliar, closed space with unfamiliar people around staring at him while he struggled to explain that he wouldn't eat with them.
"Where do you work?" Nikola asked with obvious delight in his eyes that was disarmingly similar to Alina.
"Conservatory of Music", Erik said without thinking, "We're rehearsing a symphony- "
"Which one? Can we come to watch the rehearsals?" Nikola's eyes widened.
"No", Erik blurted out. "I'm sorry. It's not ready yet."
"Which instrument?" Nikola pressed, benevolently unbothered by the walls Erik was unsuccessfully trying to set up.
Erik blinked. "Symphonic orchestra?"
"He means which instrument you're playing, darling", Alina purred.
"None this time. I do... something else. You're a scientist? I understand you were on some sort of expedition this summer?" Erik tried desperately.
"I am, indeed!" Nikola laughed, finally getting the hint. "Not a single musical bone in my body. But I'm very good at writing very long and boring books about plant and animal life, and someone's got to do that, too."
"Interesting", Erik said, hoping the man would keep talking until his ears could stop ringing with embarrassment. "What is that like?"
"I'll gladly tell you! I'd like to go outside for a cigarette, if that's alright?" he looked around the table.

"Ah, don't be difficult. I'll just open the windows", Alina said.
"No, I insist. I'd like to go outside, in fact, it's a beautiful day. Would you care to join me, sir- Erik?" Nikola looked at him, taking out a small tin box with rolled cigarettes.
"Alright." Erik stood up and followed, wondering what the hell kind of ritual he was about to misunderstand next.
Nikola closed the door gently behind him and lit his cigarette on the front porch of Alina's house, watching his host stand stiffly with his hands in his pockets.
"Such an old-fashioned custom, to have the men and women separate after a meal", Nikola exhaled the smoke. "The girls will not like that I've brought it up - I'll apologize to them later. However, it seems to me that we're not letting you talk at all, with all of us jabbering in there, and that's not very nice of us."
"That's alright. I'm usually like this."
"Hmm." Nikola paused, taking another puff. "Thank you for having Amelija with you all summer. It means a lot to her to be close to her sister."
"It wasn't a problem."
"Wasn't it? It seems to me like you've become each other's closest enemy. At least she's out of her cynical shell, I suppose."
Erik shrugged. He thought it would be inappropriate if he agreed that, yes, Amelija was now occasionally snappy and temperamental, but it was more enjoyable than when she was cold and uptight.
"I was talking about work", Nikola rambled on, feeling slightly self-conscious. Awkward pauses in conversation with his host made him nervous. "Yes, her parents wanted her to go with me. But with Amelija around, my focus would not have been on work; I would have had to watch carefully so that something doesn't happen to her. This was never meant to be a particularly dangerous trip; but I felt better knowing I could camp out for the night if I was too late to come back, instead of worrying about how Amelija would cope with anything unpleasant that might happen. She's not built for hiking and trekking - definitely not."

Erik had a revelation, suddenly. "I wasn't asking to check why you left her here. I wanted to know about what you do."

"My primary interest is flora and fauna. I'm a biologist", Nikola waved his hands. "The reason why I get sent on field expeditions, however, is somewhat funny, and nothing to do with that. I have colleagues who are more diligent scientists."
"And what is it?" Erik asked with interest.
"Well, a significant part of Earth's ecosystems is going to be humans, almost everywhere you go- I'm sure the Church would be at my neck for this classification but it is how it is. They send me on expeditions and most of the time, they put me in charge; because I have a low chance of antagonizing the native population, or getting myself killed. I am what is scientifically called likable. My colleagues are somewhat frustrated with that."
"I'm afraid I don't understand how that helps, or how you're managing to do it. Can you tell me?" Erik said. That same remark from any other man would have raised the hairs on Nikola's neck; the bluntness of it would have normally been rude but Erik kept looking at him with quiet sincerity.
Ah, I understand. This is a good man for Alina. He'll never bore her with anything but the truth.
"To be fair, expeditions are comprised of several people", Nikola started. "Not just a biologist, but an anthropologist, geologist, cartographer, and such. Only a fool would go to the uncharted wilds alone. In any case, it's usually anthropologists who know the native languages and customs. I usually pick some young, studious fool who's likely to listen to me, and have him tell me everything he knows about the area we're in. After that, I'm the one who makes decisions."
Erik listened intently; Nikola stopped to get any kind of reaction, but all he got was a little nod. He continued.
"From then on, it's a matter of etiquette, as everywhere else. I talked to Canadian tribes and occasional hermits the same way I now speak to you and Amelija's lovely American if I'm so lucky to meet him - address them politely, explain you're just passing by, bring gifts of goodwill, and take care not to scatter any cigarette ash in their house."
Nikola shrugged, scattering his cigarette ashes notably across the little yard and not the porch. "It's easy to dismiss unfamiliar men as savages, but hard to ask yourself - am I, someone they'd want in their backyard? The answer, for most of my Western colleagues, is no. and that is why I have such a high success rate, and why they send me along: I have a very clear distinction in

my head between research and colonization, and I'm adamant to keep it that way. They don't always like it, especially anthropologists when they can't leave a place with all the sacred pots and totems their heart desire. What is it with them, that they are such magpies? In any case. They do like it when they hear of another expedition that ended up dead or lost while we practically waltzed through the land. Sometimes we even pay the natives themselves to lead us through; you'd be surprised how many doors open when you approach with respect and fair barter. Of course, I'm not the Pope, nor am I delusional about my peacekeeping limits - if certain tribes are at war with the white men, I avoid them like anybody else. But I've not started any new conflicts in my career, and that's more than most of my colleagues can say."

"Interesting", Erik scratched at his temple, but only briefly. "And how did you come to be this way?"

"It's hard to say", Nikola smiled. "I'd say when you're born into a certain group, and you manage to fool them from a young age that you belong among them, even though they'd shun you if they knew who you are- you start to feel a certain disconnect from their values and way of life, and before you know it, you suddenly see a remarkable number of cracks in their way of thinking. I am not so emotionally tied to my culture, which I suppose, makes it easier to accept other ones. If you haven't got your group, you haven't got the idea of the other group so deeply embedded in your mind. At least that's what I, with my scientific reasoning, and Alina with her enthusiasm for psychology, could make of it. It's as good an explanation as any."

Erik almost asked him what the hell he was talking about and why someone like Nikola would possibly be an outcast, but he changed his mind. He'd learned enough in the past two years to recognize that as an impolite question, at least.

Nikola coughed. "I'm sorry if I'm being intrusive, but Alina has quite a history of rejecting men who show any interest in her, and she's head-over-heels in love with you. That she would be so infatuated with someone is... unexpected. Might I ask, what did the trick? Indulge me, please, I'm curious."

Erik looked at him for a moment, not responding. The man's easygoing charm was hard to resist; even though they had just met, Nikola acted as if Erik was the sort of man he'd instantly like. Erik was aware this was how

charismatic people talked, but hearing it directed at him disarmed him for some reason. It would appear I'm not as careful as I once was. Or maybe not as cynical.
"I don't know what did the trick", he finally said. "I never attempted any tricks."
"AH!" Nikola laughed. "That was incredibly clever of you. Now I see. Your secret is that you truly understand her better than anyone else who tried."
Nikola looked at Erik, covering his mouth with his hand. He had noticed that Erik never kept eye contact with him for too long, and automatically started doing the same. Nikola's personality often clashed with the more bashful individuals when he was younger, making them uncomfortable; he had learned to tone it down in his recent years. A lot of very intriguing people he met in the scientific field were bashful too, after all, and Nikola thought it very important that people feel good when talking to him. One might even say some of his self-esteem depended on it.
"I would hope so", Erik said, even though he didn't want to say anything about anything to some stranger, much less this annoyingly magnetic man.
"How did you two meet?" Nikola asked.
"She knows my mother", Erik blurted out. "Antoinette Giry introduced us."
Well, that was a perfectly normal-sounding answer, and not exactly untrue; except it was not something Erik thought would come out of his mouth in a million years.
"Oh", Nikola blinked; Antoinette didn't mention that to him back when he saw her, but maybe she thought Nikola already knew (unfortunately, until now, the sisters had largely kept him in the dark about the details of it all). Antoinette seemed incredibly kind, but she was nevertheless terrifying; he wondered what kind of childhood Erik had. "I thought my mother was strict, but yours must have been an entirely different experience."
"I didn't mind it", Erik said against his will as the man's friendliness was impossible to resist. "I like people who say exactly what they mean."
Oh, I can do that. "To continue my earlier point: seeing cracks in the group's reasoning doesn't mean one can point them out, or overtly try to pass through them. Sometimes, in both animal and human kingdoms, hiding in plain sight is the best option. Just because an individual is part of a group, doesn't mean they're not in danger from predators, internal or external", Nikola continued, watching the battle happen in his companions' very expressive eyes. "I almost learned that the hard way."

"Is that a threat?" Erik said flatly.
"It's a personal confession and an observation. And as for you, a sort of warning. You seem to be remarkably good at fitting in, even though you think yourself an outcast. You've charmed my cousins, and you might charm the rest of my family too- but superficial adoration is replaced swiftly and easily by darker things. Keep your wits about you, if you ever do meet them. Don't listen to their words if their eyes are telling you a different story."
"That's a fairly basic lesson. I learned it decades ago."
"Fair enough, I apologize." Nikola smiled at him. "I'll be blunt then since that's what you prefer. I do like you and welcome you to our family, but I would have liked any man Alina chose who was capable of making her happy. Alina's father, on the other hand, is... a peculiar man. He hates change and things he cannot control. He'll see you as the avatar of both."
"I don't see how that is", Erik protested. "Nobody forced Alina to leave, nobody forced her to stay, nobody forced her to be with me!"
"I said he was peculiar, not rational", Nikola shook his head. "Alina has been this way since the day she was born. If it wasn't for you and this life, she'd find another way to disappoint his wishes- for what it's worth, now that I've talked to you, I'm glad it was you. If any hell is raised about you and Alina back home, which I'll try to prevent- remember that law and witnesses, and your wife, are on your side. Don't try to prove anything to anyone; it's a losing game as soon as you get into a discussion with Ivan and Jelena. Treat them as particularly loud ghosts - don't mind their rattling, but try not to strike back. Their way of life has been dead for a while, and they're unwilling to let go."
"And you're suggesting... what?" Erik sounded annoyed by the conversation suddenly for reasons Nikola didn't understand.
"Nothing." Nikola lit up another cigarette. "They'll let Alina go, as they always have. They'll never make peace with the fact she's not what they wanted, but they still love her, you see. Their hearts are not so hardened that they could keep her around and watch her wilt day after day. Not now, when it's clear it will never get better between them."
The man stared at Nikola, his expression unreadable.
"Let them have their round of storms and fury. When it passes, you'll be left in peace", Nikola concluded.
"I don't know what they've told you, but we're not even married yet", Erik

remarked.
"Well, then use this advice whenever you do need it." Nikola smiled at him.
"Nikola", Alina peeked through the window. "We've decided where we're taking you. You spent two months eating thorns and sleeping on the ground and now we're going to spoil you like no one's ever spoiled you!"
"Well-seasoned thorns are sometimes better than American food, unfortunately."
"Are you bothering my fiance?"
"He isn't", Erik stated firmly. "He was telling me about his work."
"I get it, I get the hint. I'm coming inside", Nikola said with slight irony in his voice. "Alina, you have great taste in men. He's the first person who asked me anything about myself today. Maybe you two spoiled princesses could follow his example." he nodded at them and went inside.
"Ouch", Alina grimaced. "You're... probably right about that."
Erik lingered at the window for a little longer, just long enough to lean in and whisper barely audibly to Alina,
"I like him."

Chapter 48: Pomp and Circumstance II

Two days later Erik woke up at dawn, as usual, staring out at the gray sky. He had an idea - a wild and reckless idea, but it wouldn't leave his head since the day he met Nikola. As he waited for Alina to wake up, he bounced between "yes" and "absolutely not" about several dozen times; his mind was so tired from running in circles for two days that he barely had any common sense left to judge if the idea was really good or really bad.

It was up to someone else to test it, now.
"I remember you once said Amelija didn't want you to get married without her", Erik commented, looking at the ceiling as his fingers continued messing up Alina's hair. "It's something of a pity that she's leaving tomorrow, in that regard."
"It is, now that you say it", Alina replied, frowning in confusion. "Where is this going?"
"Nowhere, I'm thinking out loud."
"I see, well, unless you want to wait until she comes to visit again- which might be God knows when- she'll have to accept it."
"Does it bother you? That she will not be here?" he asked carefully.
"A little."
Erik's fingers never stopped their rhythmic movements up and down her back when he whispered, "we could do it today."
Alina sat up with lightning speed, looking at him wide-eyed.
"We don't have to", he managed.
Alina closed her eyes, sighed, then opened them to stare him down again. He felt like a butterfly pinned under a Lupe, and frankly, he wasn't having it. He cleared his throat. "I don't think I deserve this kind of treatment. You could have just refused."
"You went from let's never get married to let's get married immediately with

remarkable speed", she replied, lifting an eyebrow at him.
"I am often like that, I'm told", he sighed, grabbing his covers and starting to turn around. "It's fine; it was a stupid idea. Forget I said anything. It's not something we should do on a whim."
Alina shook her head, frowning. "How would that even work? How would we organize it in a single day?"
"Well, one can get married whenever. You need only go and request that you get married, and sign your name. Well, you need witnesses, but we do have them, we'd just have to ask." Erik sighed. "I asked Jack about it, back when we were getting our citizenship."
"But that's only the paperwork. I meant the whole wedding!" Alina hissed. "It's not something I could do in a day!"
Now it was Erik's turn to sit up in distress. "Pardon me? What kind of wedding were you expecting? I don't want to go to an actual wedding, much less mine. Don't you have dozens of relatives? I was hoping to do it this way - with only a few people - today or not today."
"I- alright, yes, I expected that." Alina leaned her head on her hand, thinking. "Alright, so a legal marriage is easily done. I think a church ceremony would- might- be more problematic. We need to talk about that."
"I- oh", he sighed. "I- that might be a problem, yes. I think I was properly baptized, I'm not sure- but that was my last real encounter with the Catholic church. We'd have to find someone, uh, liberal enough to marry us like this. If that's what you want."
"I- what do you want?"
"I don't care about any church. I'm not going to take any sacraments. If you want to, or have to get married there, I'll do it for you- well, within reason. I'm not about to become a devout Catholic; I don't think I could, even if I wanted to."
"That doesn't matter", Alina trailed off, thoughtful. "I don't care if the Church considers you one of us or not. If we find a priest, great, if not, I'll let it go and think of something. I just wanted to take a moment to thank God on a day like this."
Erik looked at her for a moment, trying to process that last part with dignity.
"I'm certain this insane land has someone who would marry us on the spot."
"Probably, yes."
Alina shifted awkwardly.
"This probably sounds stupid and frivolous, but I don't have a wedding

dress."
"I don't think that's mandatory?" Erik asked.
Alina kept her wits about her for a full second before her shoulders started shaking and she started giggling. "No, I just want a pretty dress."
"Could you get one today?"
"Not if I have it sewn. If it's already made, and I'm lucky enough, I could buy a dress in one, not a wedding dress. But a dress. But I'm fairly tall and unlikely to find something that fits me without any alterations."
"I… understand", Erik said. He didn't- he was fully prepared to get married in whatever he chose to throw on that day, but he didn't want to say anything just in case this was only an excuse for something deeper.
"Listen to me", Alina suddenly grabbed both his hands. "This is insane. I've never wanted to do something so reckless and rash so badly in my entire life."
"I find that hard to believe."
"We're talking about getting married in a single day! It's not something that happens to you twice in your life! Are you certain you haven't put some spell on me?"
"I didn't think it would happen to me once, to be fair", he shrugged. "I'm not going to force it. We'll do it when you're ready."
"I am ready right this minute!" Alina looked at him with a slightly manic smile that was at the same time very amusing and uncomfortable to watch.
"You suggested it! Are you backing down now?"
"Absolutely not."
"Let's do it!"
"And your dress?" he asked carefully.
"I'll think of something! I'll ask Amelija what we can do, I'll make do with the clothes I have- she did give me those old earrings, mama, it's like you knew- hah!" she laughed. "I will count it as debt. You owe me a beautiful dress and an occasion. For today, I'll think of something and it will be great in the end, I'm sure."
"A dress and an occasion. I'll remember it." he looked around, then back at her, and in the dim light behind the curtains, his oddly colored eyes shone at her. "This is happening, isn't it? You're agreeing to marry me? Today?"
"I'm quite sure it's all real", Alina leaned in. Her whisper sounded positively conspiratorial.
Erik's grip on her hands tightened. "We're getting married. Today. Forever."

"Forever," Alina whispered back. "But we do have to hurry. The ceremonies can only be held before three in the afternoon. We have to take care of everything until then."
"...oh." Erik's voice faltered. "So we have to find a church with a forgiving-enough priest in… seven hours?"
"And clothes, and inviting people, and several other minor things."
"Wedding rings."
"Rings, damnit!" Alina cursed. "I forgot about that! Could we just buy them on the way there?"
"Don't worry about that", Erik kissed her forehead and turned to get dressed. "I'll take care of it. Go do whatever you need to do."
"Of all the… ideas you've had, this is certainly an… idea", Amelija managed, staring at her sister wide-eyed. Her hand, holding a coffee cup, paused halfway to her mouth.
"It is insane!" Alina exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air. Her face, however, was still grinning that excited, slightly-concerning grin. "Never mind that! We'll make it work!"
"How?"Amelija whined, rubbing her eyes. "How in God's name will you make it work?"
"First", Alina looked at her, the madness in her eyes instantly replaced by cold precision. "I'll go to Jack right now, and you'll go get Nikola. Second, you'll help me get clothes and flowers, and do my hair. Third, I don't care who cooks and gets the wine, but it won't be me, not on my wedding day, so the rest of you will take care of that. Erik will get Yana and Piotr, and we'll all gather here and see if we can find a priest on short notice."
"And rings."
"Ah, I forgot about the rings! Erik will take care of it, it's his problem!"
"As I've said, you don't need to worry about it", he remarked, looking slightly amused. "I'll take care of everything. I'm going to Yana right now; you needn't lift a finger."
"What does that mean?" Piotr asked. Yana showed exactly zero signs of surprise when Erik told her the news; she promised to help and excused herself to first go and find some Sunday clothes for Piotr.
"I don't know", Erik admitted to him. At least the child wasn't likely to judge him for it. "What I do know is, it means we'll always be together."
"You are always together!"
"That's true", Yana said, coming from her room with some proper clothes

for Piotr and herself. "People just like to write it down, you know? As a promise."
"I don't know how to do this", Erik said to Yana's ceiling with his voice somewhere between panicked and elated. He couldn't look at her as he said it. "I don't know where to find a priest. I don't know how these ceremonies work. I've never been to any! Nobody ever explained it to me!"
"I'm explaining it to you now", Yana said calmly, poking his shoulder.
"There is no way in hell I'm going to do this right- "
"It doesn't matter. There's only us there. There is no shame."
"Where?" Erik rubbed his temples. "We don't know where we're getting married!"
"Oh, maybe I have an idea", Yana said. "Polina used to work as a maid before she started with us, you know?"
"Who?" Erik asked.
"Polina, the Slovak girl. The one who's in love with Amelija."
"The one who's… what?"
"Nevermind, just gossip. She used to work as a maid for some old priest. He needed help, he was very old and sick. But he's not sick now, and still, he works. She said he's nice. We could go ask him."
"Do you know where he is?" he asked in shock.
"Maybe I can remember", Yana smiled. "He likes sweets. Visited her once. Anyway -"
Alina knocked on Jack's door several times before he bothered to answer. He looked slightly disheveled and frizzy-haired, and for some reason, disappointed to see her there. Alina hadn't talked to Jack since they had that argument, and the few times she asked Erik about him he would only reply that Jack's "had better days".
"I'm getting married!" she proclaimed. "And I don't want to do it without you."
"You're getting what?" he rubbed his eyes. "When?"
"Today, if we hurry."
"Today?" Jack hissed. "Today? You woke up and decided to get married on the same day?"
"Not me, Erik did."
"Of course he did!"
"In any case, Amelija and Nikola are leaving tomorrow. This may be my only chance to have them at my wedding."

A shadow of a painful grimace flashed upon Jack's face for a split second.
"Oh."
"I know we haven't been on the best of terms lately, but you have to come. I don't want to do this without you. I'm sorry I haven't said this before - but you are one of my, closest friends. And we need you there. I wanted to come myself, and apologize. You've done nothing but help me and lately, I've only been complicating your life. Please come to my wedding."
Jack listened to her, uncharacteristically quiet.
"Amelija is still avoiding you, isn't she?" Alina asked carefully.
"That's an answer in itself", Jack shrugged.
"She's stubborn and evasive, but she'll come to her senses. Trust me."
"I don't have a lifetime to wait for her", Jack said, his face becoming unreadable again. "She's leaving, and she hasn't even left me a letter for goodbye - whereas you came personally to apologize. That's an answer in itself. But I won't miss your wedding day to stay home and mope because of her."
Instead of an answer, Jack found himself stumbling when Alina hugged him so tightly that she nearly knocked the air out of his lungs.
"Careful, don't make your fiance jealous."
"We are so stupid!" she finally let him go and covered her face with her hands. "We don't deserve you at all! That's so sweet of you!"
"You sound slightly manic. Are you sure I don't need to call a doctor?"
"I just really think you're so nice!"
"Ah, who could ever stay mad at you? You crazy manipulative bitch", Jack laughed at her as he went back inside. "Just leave me alone for a minute so I can find some proper clothes. I'll meet you back at your house."
"Alright", Alina said in her commanding, teaching tone to the room full of people. "So. I've gathered you all here to"
"Teacher, I have a question", Nikola waved his hand cheerfully, not looking up while rolling his cigarette. They all sat at the small kitchen table, cramped in the small room, except for Erik who stood in the corner with his arms crossed and something between amusement and horror in his eyes. Nikola was in the middle, splitting the space between Amelija and Jack; Yana sat next to Jack and Piotr decidedly took the place on Nikola's lap, having met him two days ago and immediately deciding they were practically brothers now.
"Yes?" Alina asked sweetly.

"What are you going to do with your last name now?" Nikola asked, looking thoroughly amused.
"Stick another one on top of it. Now-"
"I also have a question", Jack raised his hand, eyeing Nikola only slightly.
"Yes, honey, please tell", Alina purred in her best "tired teacher at the end of the day" voice.
"Is it going to be Alina Boričević Giry from now on?"
"Yes."
"With the hyphen? Or without?"
"With. Boričević-Giry."
"Do you understand how completely unintelligible that will be for everyone who has to read it or write it down?"
"I simply don't think that's my problem", Alina smiled coldly.
Erik cleared his throat behind them. "She doesn't have to change it at all. Does she? Is it mandatory?"
"The "Giry" part is the least of her problems", Jack turned to him. "Most people change their names to something shorter, or easier to read when they immigrate-"
"And I won't", Alina held up her finger. "I don't care how people butcher my name. I didn't pick any of my names until now, and none of you people get to pick for me now. The Americans can learn to pronounce it as they please. I'm not looking for a stage name, you know. I already have a job. Can we move on?"
"What are you going to wear?" Amelija asked.
"I was hoping you'd help me with that. We'll have to make do with things I have. Or things you have, if you're so generous."
"Ni pod milim Bogom1", Amelija replied, and they once again burst into a quick unintelligible exchange in Croatian before Alina sighed and nodded.
"Alright. You're right; it wouldn't work very well together. Can we at least agree on me keeping the hairpins? They're important to me. And can you do my hair?"
"Huh", Amelija was slightly stumped. "Well, I can probably… make it all work… if you have a nice dress, but it would look better with a veil…"
"I have a veil", Yana's soft voice chimed in.
Everyone turned to her, suddenly remembering she was there.
"You have a wedding veil to spare?" Alina broke the silence. "Just lying around?"

"No, it was from my wedding. I saved it. You can have it today, but then you give it back", she pointed her finger at Alina. "Don't mess it up with wine."
"Of course, I'll keep it like a treasure, which it is."
"Today. You'll keep it like a treasure today. After that you give it back." her finger moved to Erik now. "You two already have my violin. Can't have my veil too. I'll give you proper wedding gifts later."
"Thank you, Yana", they replied in unison.
"Alright, so… Yana says she knows of a priest, conveniently… One or two of you will get us all food and wine, I don't care who it is. Jack? Nikola? I think you two can manage. Amelija stays with me to do my hair. Erik, will you - oh, right. I think that's about all."
"Do you two have wedding rings?" Nikola offered.
"I keep forgetting about stupid rings!" Alina threw her hands up. "We do need them, dammit! We'll have to buy them on the way there, one way or another!"
"Wait", Erik lifted his finger, then turned around. He reached for the bookshelf, removed a few books, then pressed an invisible point on the shelf. In what seemed like a solid slab of wood, a little lid popped up, revealing a tiny drawer. He reached into it, pulled out a very very small blue velvet box, then turned around to face Alina who had watched the whole scene in silent astonishment.
After a moment of self-conscious hesitation, he walked up to her before he opened the box and offered it to her- in there stood two thin, simple golden rings. They had no gemstones and no ornaments, but as Alina looked at them she could barely make out an inscription on the underside of each ring.
"Y- you had these the whole time?" she stuttered, looking at him in bewilderment. "How long have they been here?"
"Been here? What are you talking about? It's just a magic shelf that materializes whatever you need at a specific moment", he said awkwardly, aware that they weren't alone.
"I think I need a drink", Alina said, visibly distressed as she rubbed her forehead.
"We have other shelves for that, darling", he remarked. "Don't overuse the magic one."
Alina still looked at him with that expression of unsure if I want to kiss you

or kill you she often had around him.
"You don't like them?" he hurried. "I'll get different ones- I thought, you usually prefer simple jewelry, and I didn't know, but I'll get new ones, whatever you like-"
"They are beautiful", she raised her hands in a gesture of peace. "I love them, you were right. I was simply… shocked by your, well, level of preparedness."
"Alright then", he said slowly.
"Can I see the inscription?"
"Could we do that, uh, later perhaps? We're not alone."
"Ah", Alina turned back to where Amelija and Nikola were standing, trying their best not to burst into laughter. "In that case, I suppose we can... go?"
"I think we all need a drink first", Nikola said as his mouth twitched, threatening to break into a smile. "I'm losing my mind just spectating this, and I can only imagine how it feels in the epicenter."
"I can help with that", Jack remarked, taking out a small bottle of whiskey from his pocket and pouring it into several glasses. "I don't have proper wedding gifts either, because you two are impossible to plan for - but anyway, I brought something to toast with." He didn't look at Amelija even once as he poured. When she reached out her hand for a glass, he set it down on the table before her.
From then on, it was fairly simple. Nikola and Jack went to get things, Erik quickly changed into some better clothes in his room, and went outside to wait until Alina was ready.
Amelija, barking orders Alina to put this on and do that and stand still while she helped her dress, didn't hear the gentle rapping on Alina's window; it was only when Alina reached for it that she slapped her hand away and went to open it herself.
"Yes?" she said annoyedly, not even checking who it was. "Can you even give her a minute to get properly dressed, or are you in such a rush?"
"I was under the impression this was a voluntary affair", Erik said, standing next to the window with his back to the wall and looking straight in front of him.
"It's- alright, fine. Sorry. Didn't mean to offend you on your wedding day. What do you want? We're in a hurry."
"I want you to give these to her", Erik said, still looking ahead as he held out a little bouquet of white wildflowers.

"Can't you give them to her later? Her hands are full, what is she going to do with them now?" Amelija hissed. She almost added do you think wildflowers are the appropriate bouquet for a wedding, but she bit it back. Any attempt she had made to teach them about social conventions thus far only made them temporarily insecure; and besides, her mother was not here, there was no point in impersonating her.
"I know what she might want to do with them, and I think she'll know what I'm suggesting she should do with them - just give them to her, can you?"
Amelija took the flowers from him. "Alright."
"You're very kind to help us", he mumbled as he stared into the distance with his arms crossed. The amber cufflinks holding the wrists of his pure white shirt gleamed a little, even as he tried to push his black jacket down to hide them from her.
Amelija shook her head and closed the window, giving the flowers to Alina.
"Ah, I see. We'll braid them into my hair."
Amelija blinked. "With the veil and the hairpins, do you think you need wildflowers in your hair?"
"So? We'll do a simpler hairstyle. We just need a few of them - it's all white and silver anyway. Aren't wedding clothes supposed to be ornate?"
"They might wilt."
"It's really important to me, Amelija."
Alina's wedding attire was quite simple in the end - the lightest dress she had was the beige linen one with embroidered poppies and they were quite lucky that the weather was warm enough for it; Amelija threw a shrug over Alina's shoulders for modesty sake. Aside from the hairpins, the veil, and the flowers, she had her mother's earrings and a pair of new shoes she'd bought and hadn't had a chance to wear yet. Amelija regretted that they wouldn't be able to do more - her dresses simply wouldn't fit Alina, and it was far too late to think of anything extravagant. Alina, on the other hand, looked so happy when she stepped out for everyone to see her that Amelija had to admit there was something special about her that day. Nothing they dressed her in was particularly classy or special, but combined with the pure joy radiating from Alina like sunshine, it all turned into something entirely breathtaking.
Erik, his expression between elated and panicked, gently whispered something in Alina's ear.
"Of course, you can comment", she smiled. "Are we still on about this?"

"In that case, I'd just like to say I think you look beautiful."
After that, they all agreed they should stop wasting time and go. They each had another small glass of whiskey (except for Piotr), agreeing that it would probably be better if they didn't mention that part to anybody, let alone the priest.
The part of Brooklyn that Yana was leading them to was neither pretty nor affluent. It was a poor working-class neighborhood - clean, but cramped and grey with tall buildings that housed many people of all possible backgrounds in cramped little apartments; the little church stood out as one of the prettier buildings in the vicinity. Alina had visited the Vatican with her parents as a child - she remembered it now, the off-putting intimidation she felt at its shining and glorious riches. The small and dusty little church she saw for the first time on her wedding day, in contrast, felt like she was coming home to somebody who loved her.
"I like it", she decided. Nobody was surprised. She felt Erik's hand tighten around hers.
"I don't get many people like you asking me to marry them", the priest pointed out when they explained what they wanted. His office was small and cramped, and the priest himself was an old, cranky-looking man. He was surprisingly small with his hunched back and still clad in his loose, daily attire. His skin and eyes were dark brown, but his tightly-curly hair had turned completely white, and his ancient face wrinkled with confusion as they entered. "There are more upstanding churches, and prettier ones too. Do you have any particular reason why you're in such a hurry?"
"Well, Father, if I may", the woman spoke. "We've loved each other for a while now, and we'd hate to wait much longer. My sister and cousin are leaving for Europe tomorrow, and I'd love for them to be present."
"As far as reasons go, this is one of the least stressful ones", the priest rubbed his eyes. He thought about it for a minute, while the couple waited. The man was starting to shift uncomfortably, obviously nervous. He still hadn't spoken much or looked the priest in his eyes directly.
"I technically can marry you", the priest, Gilbert, said slowly. "Despite your lack of sacraments. I've done it before; I will do it occasionally if I conclude the couple's intentions are pure, and they're both doing it of their own will."
The man who looked at him (but never into his eyes) carefully the whole time, barely gave him any sign that he heard him, much less a reaction; even though he was the one benefitting from this. He nodded after a

moment, then glanced at the woman, who beamed a smile of relief. "Thank you, Father!" she exclaimed. Her sincere joy and gratitude were hard for Gilbert to stay cold too.
"I'd like to talk to you both first, and get to know you", he continued, telling himself not to get swayed by pretty girls with flowers in their hair and stars in their eyes; plenty of them wound up horribly after they got what they wanted. "We'll have a little chat, and I'll take your confessions. After that, if all is well, I can marry you. Is this alright with you both?"
The couple looked at each other, still holding hands. The man bowed his head in question at the woman, who shrugged and smiled apologetically.
"It's alright", she said. "Darling?"
"Yes", the man turned to Gilbert and nodded at him, his gaze still carefully dancing just a little to the left of Gilbert's eyes. "It's alright."
Gilbert barely heard the man on the other side as he stepped into the confession booth. He closed the door behind him and remained standing in the center.
"You can sit", Gilbert offered helpfully.
The man remained stubbornly standing. "I don't know how all of this works. I've never done it before."
"You won't find out how it works today, either. This is highly irregular." Gilbert replied. "I must insist on talking to you both before you are forever tied before God. Anything else would be irresponsible of me. Surely you understand."
"What are you hoping to find, talking to me?" the man said quietly from the other side. His voice was near a whisper now. "I am already tied to her forever."
"I see."
"God or no god - I've never been his favorite, and I've made peace with that. There were times I thought I was handcrafted by the Devil himself - those who saw me certainly thought so, too."
"I see. And now?"
"I don't know anymore. Perhaps there is still hope for me. I'd like to think I'm different now."
"One person may not be enough to bring you salvation", Gilbert prodded. He knew it would provoke him, and he was right.
"Salvation?" the man hissed quietly. "I'm not asking for it. I've done well enough so far with no salvation, no faith, and no hope whatsoever. It was

precisely a handful of people who saved me, quite literally."
"What did you come looking for here?" Gilbert said, unfazed by the man's standoffishness.
"Nothing. I've lost hope that your holy people would see me as a worthy human being. I am only asking to be legally married to the one person who does. I was told it can be achieved, with the right priest and the right amount of money."
"You need to sit down and mind your place, young man", the priest replied coldly. "I am not in the business of bribery, as you can see by the state of my church. The only way for you to get what you want is to stop your posturing and your standoffish attitude and talk to me for five minutes, so I can reasonably conclude you're in any way capable of taking care, for the rest of your life, of a woman who loves you."
The man's shadow moved as he sat down without a sound. The floorboards barely scraped as he moved; he could have very well been a ghost or a whisper.
"I don't pretend to know God's plan, or why He works in certain ways", Gilbert continued. "I've seen suffering, and I've spoken to outcasts in my life. I know a forsaken man when I see one."
There was no reply from the other side.
"I don't consider myself worthy of judging who is made in God's image and who is not. Only you can decide what you do with yourself. I am only here to judge whether you'll ruin that pretty creature waiting for you out there."
"I have nothing to offer to convince you", the man replied. "Except things she might not want me to tell you."
"Why not? Are they her personal affairs? I do expect you both to be honest with me. I am obligated to take it to my grave."
"No, they're- our personal affairs. We've been together for a while now."
"That's not nearly as scandalous to hear when you're in my position as you'd think, young man."
"Perhaps." Erik paused. "We've been together for a while now, and I've held her like a single drop of water on the palm of my hand. I've done everything I can to make her happy. I've rebuilt myself, from the ground up, to be worthy of her. I've given her all of myself, and I've given her the choice of leaving me every step of the way. I don't know what else I can tell you."
"That's enough. It's more than most people. Don't lose it along the way."
"I'm sure she'll remind me quite noticeably if I do."

"What happened to you, son?" Gilbert interrupted. "What made you think you were so unforgivable?"
"Do I really have to go through this on my wedding day?" the man demanded, and his voice heightened in pitch a bit, obviously distressed. "Haven't you had enough? Do I have to re-live actual torture? Is it like this for everyone?"
"No", Gilbert concluded, his voice softening. "I was hoping to offer consolation, not torture. But I think we're done here. At least for now- nothing is stopping you from returning, if you ever feel the need to."
The man stood up.
"Hold on", Gilbert said. "Just a moment more. Do you have anything you wish to confess?"
The man stopped. "In terms of?"
"Sins, young man."
"I've done many bad things. I was on a path to become everything I hated."
"And do you feel remorse?"
"I do."
"Have you made amends?"
"I tried. I'm trying to. I'll do what I can."
"You are forgiven", Gilbert said. "Go, be at peace." He stood up, thankful it was over and left the booth. The man hurried after him, then Gilbert felt a single finger tap him on the shoulder from behind.
Gilbert turned to see the man standing awkwardly stiff behind him.
"Thank you", Erik said, looking into Gilbert's eyes for the first time.
The young lady dropped on the wooden bench with unladylike casualness, letting out a long sigh. Young ladies were usually giddy and bashful at their wedding; the casual and warm tone this woman used with Gilbert was slightly uncharacteristic.
"It's been a while since I've done this", she admitted. "Forgive me, Father, for me-"
"Yes, I know how it goes", Gilbert rubbed his eyes. "Listen to me. Do you know what you're doing?"
"Getting married, hopefully? Father." the woman's voice wavered suspiciously.
"And you know this man well?" Gilbert frowned.
"I do."
"You're aware that marriage is forever?"

"I am."
"Nobody is pressuring you into this? You're doing this of your own free will?"
"Yes, of course, I am!" the woman raised her voice slightly.
"Quiet, please."
"I apologize, Father. I'm not naive. I know my fiance well, and I know what I'm getting myself into. Why the suspicion? What did he say to you?" he could slightly make out her form leaning closer to the caravan between them.
"It's more what he didn't say than what he said. A difficult man to get close to, that one."
"Oh, difficult indeed", the young woman puffed, throwing herself back. "I'm aware of that. Exhausting man to say the least. Hilariously unpredictable; he drives me insane."
"I see. Not a typical thing for a bride to say on her wedding day."
"Perhaps brides could use a little bit of reality, only a small amount of it, to ease the transition?" The woman's voice now had a hint of laughter.
"Could be." Gilbert wasn't sure if this was a very good sign or a very bad one, so he let the silence spread out around them.
"Perhaps", she continued, "perhaps I could say I also like that, a little bit? There are a lot of things to love about my future husband, but the things less loveable… perhaps I love them, too? The moody silence and difficult conversations? Perhaps it doesn't matter what obstacles we have around us or within us, as long as we're both crossing them together?"
"That is a good way of thinking, I would agree."
"May I also confess some things?" she said carefully.
"Of course, that's why you're here."
"I must admit that I am full of hubris. I didn't realize how much, until a while ago. I was convinced that the whole world rested on my shoulders. I always did everything myself. I always had someone to save. I always knew best." she paused. "I don't know if I think of myself as more clever, competent, capable than others - or if I'm afraid nobody will help me even if I ask. But it's changed since I met him. I've been able to breathe for the first time. Isn't that lovely?"
"And now somebody else is taking care of you?"
"I wouldn't say - I mean, in my daily life, not much has changed. On the inside, I know that if I ask, somebody will help me. I have opened my heart

to the possibility of being able to count on others."
"I wish you the best of luck with that", Gilbert said. There was no sarcasm in his voice. He finished the confession and let the young woman out, where the man was waiting for her looking like he'd been in the desert for forty years.
"I'll marry you", Gilbert sighed. "Let's go." he turned around and went to get his things as he saw the young couple grin at each other in excitement.
"I'm afraid my organist isn't here now", he remarked. "In case you wanted music."
"No need. We'll do that part at home", the man remarked absentmindedly.
Gilbert decided not to ask what he meant. He read through the mass and the vows automatically, without hearing himself as he was doing it - he'd done it many, many times, and the words and the steps were all routines now. His attention was fixed on the young couple: smiling, slightly shocked, looking like they couldn't believe what was happening; and the wedding party: two men and two women, one of them holding a small boy. They were all standing quietly; the short brown-haired woman - the bride's sister - wiped a few tears with her handkerchief when she thought nobody was looking. The olive-skinned man hugged her.
He got to the part where they were supposed to talk, and as he finished and looked expectantly at the young masked man, he somehow managed to pull himself together enough to speak. He looked Gilbert directly in his eyes with a pleading look Gilbert had never seen nor would never see again in his life.
"Yes", the man whispered, then cleared his throat. "I do." he pulled out a golden wedding band, and his hands shook so much that he dropped it; Gilbert had seen that scene many times before and often rolled his eyes at it. It was fashionable - an omen of good luck - for the groom to "accidentally" drop the rings in many social circles. This man, however, bewildered and scatterbrained, definitely wasn't capable of doing anything on purpose. He managed to put the ring on the woman's hand.
"I do", she said without missing a beat when it was her turn. She took out the other ring, and the man reluctantly took the glove off his right hand - pale, scarred hand - so that she could put the ring on it. Gilbert didn't have the heart to correct his mistake.
They signed their names in such absolute silence that Gilbert could hear the scratching of the quill against paper and the masked man's frantic breathing.

"You may now-" he didn't manage to finish; they looked at each other, the woman let out one hysterical laugh and they hugged, tightly, forgetting to pay any attention to anyone else in the room. They didn't kiss, and the woman still had her veil, but Gilbert let them be.
This is not something you see every day, he thought. He caught himself wishing he'd meet them again one day.
"You are now married before God and your witnesses", he told them, and they reluctantly pulled away from each other, wiping a few stray tears. "Go home and celebrate. And-" he pointed his finger, and they finally turned to him.
"Take care of each other", he finally said. "You have my blessing."
He walked them out, too slowly for his taste, stopping every once in a while for everyone in the wedding party to hug the bride and say unintelligible words in some foreign language. The groom was still silent; nobody but the pale blonde woman hugged him, but Gilbert could see people patting his back gently in the corner of his eye.
"Amelija, do these Americans eat lunch?" Nikola said on their way back. He had a (correct) feeling nobody knew where they were going, and were all following the bride and groom (who were practically sleepwalking and in no way fit to lead anyone anywhere).
"Barely", she said. "They like dinner more."
"We ought to celebrate. Are we going to have lunch now? Together?" Nikola asked loudly.
"I'm sorry, I don't eat", Erik turned to him, still looking like he wasn't entirely present in his body.
Nikola stared at him speechlessly, then turned to Amelija to see if he would get any context for what had to be a joke.
"I don't know what to tell you, I've never seen him eat", she shrugged.
Nikola looked at the newlyweds, awkward and scatterbrained, with a sort of distant, frantic spark in their eyes. Neither of them had spoken since they left the chapel.
"Right", he said. "I think we should leave the newly-wedded couple alone for a few hours to get, uh, back to Earth. You two go on home if you will- or wherever you want- and the rest of us will join you around sunset. It's noon now, so you have six hours to gather yourselves while Amelija and I pack up. But after that, I'm coming for food and drinks, and you better act normal and have a proper celebration before we leave. Understood?" he

asked Alina strictly. "This is our last night here. I do not intend to sleep until our ship leaves at dawn."
"Yes", she smiled an angelic smile back at him. Nikola would not have endured another moment around them.
Having walked the rest of the way in dreamy silence, as they were almost near their doorstep, Alina stopped and giggled. Erik took out the keys, unlocked the front door, and opened it. He was already stepping inside when he noticed Alina still behind him, smiling.
"You have to carry me over the doorstep", Alina pointed out, unmoving.
"Haven't we done that before?" he smiled.
"So? It's bad luck if I trip over the doorstep on my wedding day. You have to carry me, just in case."
Erik smiled and nodded, carefully lifting her in his arms and carrying her over. Once inside, he gently lowered her down, locked the door, checked that all the windows had curtains on them, and returned to silently stand before her. Even though they felt like hours had passed, it was still a warm, bright, sunny day outside. Inside, Erik's form was cast in the dim half-light as Alina faced him. His lips were faintly smiling, his eyes fixed on her.
He reached out and carefully untangled her veil out of her hair without removing the flowers, kissing her forehead, her eyelids, and her lips. Alina felt the tips of his fingers lightly fluttering down her neck to rest on her shoulders.
She reached out with her hands, and he bowed his head to her; she found the strings of his mask on the back of his head, slowly untied it, and let it drop on the floor. With one hand gently laid on each side of his face, she whispered, "We're safe, and I love you."
"I love you, too", he whispered back, closing his eyes. "Forever."
1 It's an archaic phrase my great-grandmother used hilariously often with me, meaning literally "not even under God's grace", and figuratively "absolutely fucking not".

Chapter 49:Summer's End

"Well", Nikola looked at his new friends as the newly-wedded couple left. "Where do you all want to go? Does anybody know a good place nearby?"

"I know several", Jack offered. "You'd have to tell me what sort of places you like first." it seemed that whatever resentment Jack originally harbored towards Nikola dissipated quite quickly; his normal easygoing facade had almost completely returned.
"Ah, I'm not picky", Nikola shrugged.
"That's what I like to hear. Let me think about it." Jack scratched his head.
Nikola coughed. "It would also be worth noting that Amelija and I still have all of our things half-packed in my hotel. If we're staying up all night - it would be wise if we packed and brought our suitcases with us. I can't trust myself with packing after a whole night of drinking. I can barely trust myself to find the ship in time."
Yana shrugged. "I also can't stay long. I have to go work and then I can come back later in the evening."
"Ah, yes", Nikola scratched his head. "It's a normal workday here. I completely forgot, with everyone acting like it's some sort of holiday. Don't those two work as well?"
"Alina actually switched with other teachers and worked extra last week so she could be with us today since it's our last day here", Amelija said. "As for Erik, I don't know, that's his business."

"I sent a letter to Olly - his colleague. It won't be a problem", Jack said, pointedly looking at Nikola so it wouldn't seem he was replying to Amelija by any means.

Nikola suddenly realized, that with Yana gone, he might be left with only these two people, and felt an immediate flash of panic.
Jack must have had the same thought. He turned to Yana, saying "Who is

staying with Piotr today?"
"Svetlana, probably."
"I can do it." he looked back at Nikola. "You two can pack and then go directly to their house."
"You're leaving the wedding? Don't you want to celebrate with us?"
"He wouldn't", Yana said firmly. "He wouldn't run away from his friends' wedding. We'll all meet at their house after my work is over."
"You're right, I wouldn't run away from my friends' wedding", Jack smiled at Piotr. "What about it, kid? Do you want to come with me while your mom works?"
"But- Nikola-"
"We'll come back to them, I promise. We're just giving them a few hours to pack and rest."
"Yeah, sure", Piotr replied and automatically took Jack's hand.
"We'll catch up with you then", Jack nodded politely to Nikola. "Yana? You're going the same way?"
"Right. We'll all meet later, at my house", Yana said, nodding to both Nikola and Amelija in a desperate attempt to make the situation a little less awkward. Nikola could see they were caught up in some conversation as they left, with Jack losing all of his standoffish attitudes once Amelija was out of view. They seemed like old friends, and Jack suddenly seemed like a charming, likable man.
"Amelija, you have to tell him", Nikola demanded. "It doesn't look to me like he'll just wait around for you to make up your mind!"
"Well, maybe he-"
"He's right, Amelija!"
"Oh, stop it! I need to go and pack, and I've - had enough advice! I just need to think for a minute!"
Nikola didn't have the heart to tell her the minute may have passed already.

"Krijesnice", Nikola nudged Amelija as they passed through the suburbs on their way to Yana's house. "Fireflies, over there in the bushes. Very nice." he paused and took a few steps off the road to look at them, leaving their baggage in Amelija's hands without any consideration. "Autumn is coming, they won't be here much longer."
"I never noticed them, I have to admit."
"They're shy", Nikola smiled, forcing himself to stop looking at cute bugs

and return to the path.
Amelija didn't comment, growing quieter as they got closer. Nikola didn't ask.
Yana's house was the last one before Alina's, which was situated a little off the road and just a little bit further from the rest of them. Nikola made a note that he would have to ask one day how they acquired such a peculiar house with such a peculiar position.
Yana was already occupied with Piotr and chatting politely with Jack in her kitchen when they arrived; Jack regarded them with only a nod.
"I got some cakes from work", Yana remarked. "I told girls Alina got married, and they all rushed to pack so many cakes. It was very sweet."
"Oh, there's still food from earlier. Jack and I brought it. You didn't have to."
"They wanted to give it."
"We brought wine", Nikola gestured. "Some last-minute gifts, too."
"I didn't bring anything", Jack admitted. "I was with the kid all afternoon. He wanted to stay and I couldn't say no."
The kid was currently eating his dinner in absolute quiet, unbothered by the adults' conversation.
"There's too much as it is", Nikola shrugged. "When is it, uh, polite to get there? Should we wait some more?"
"I think we don't have to", Jack replied. "But we can be a little late, just to make them jittery."
"On their wedding day?"
"Just a little bit, for fun. They've been getting on my nerves all summer."
"Alright. One smoke then we go, as they say back home", Nikola took out a cigarette, and Jack reached into his pocket, offering him a box of matches, then opened Yana's window. He rummaged through the cabinet to find a porcelain ashtray and joined Nikola with his cigarette by the window. Yana didn't seem to mind him going through her kitchen cabinet, and took out several glasses as well as one of the wine bottles. Nikola couldn't help but notice they were all very intimate with each other in this strange bubble Alina had found herself in. He also couldn't help but regret what an amusing in-law Jack would have been.
"Hello, Alina", Nikola sang as he let himself in, waving a bottle of what looked like very expensive wine. Alina was sitting on the couch, listening to Erik who had been playing his harpsichord but stopped immediately after

they arrived. Jack was right: they were a little bit impatient, although they tried not to let it show. Nikola smiled. "We're a little late, but I'm calling the academic quarter1. Are you ready for your first dance? Or did you get that done already?"
"One more remark like that and you're banished from the wedding", Alina replied without missing a beat before Erik even had a chance to comprehend what he was saying.
Nikola laughed. "Aw, alright. I didn't want you to have this experience without at least one creepy double entendre from your extended family."
"Thank the Lord, that quota is filled now." Alina stood up and started pulling out plates, cutlery, and glasses. Erik tried to help, but she shooed him off. Nikola sat down and watched it unfold as everyone tried to make their way around the tiny kitchen/living room. He looked at his host - now seemingly more relaxed than before, but still sort of stiff, as if he didn't know what to do with all of them there.

"How are you two doing? Did you miss us?" Nikola asked.

Erik thought for a moment before the uneasy look in his eyes relaxed with an apologetic smile. "Not really, no."
Nikola burst into laughter. "Well, that was a stupid question."
"Why is there so much cake?" Alina said behind him. "Are we going to eat cake all day long? What were you thinking?"
"Your friend Yana is to blame for that, not me. We also found some half-decent prosciutto and cheese. You have buns and pastries at the bottom, too, and some fruit."
"A fresh tomato or cucumber wouldn't kill-"
"Also with the fruit. Where they belong."
"We are not having this conversation again", Alina concluded as she unpacked everything onto her best plates and put it on the table as Amelija helped her. The rest of them were in a lazy, celebratory mood, but Amelija was eager to busy her hands in any way possible so she wouldn't have to sit down - especially next to someone - or think about anything at all. Nobody understood what was going on with her, and why the sudden change in her behavior, so nobody dared to comment so openly.
"What does it mean?" Piotr asked as he climbed onto one of the chairs, then over it to the table, and sat across from Erik looking into his eyes. "That

you are married?"
"I'm quite new at this", Erik smiled slightly. "I can tell you more in about ten years or so when I get good at it."
"Ugh", Piotr rolled his eyes.
"Do you want to play a game?" Erik said, pulling out three small cups. "I'll put something in one of these three cups, and if you guess where it is, you can have it."
"Can I have three guesses?"
"You're a clever little prince, but no."
When they all finally settled down, sitting on the chairs, couch, and floor surrounded by plates upon plates of food and wine Nikola brought, Jack raised his glass and tapped a knife against it with mocked elegance.
"Always wanted to do that", he joked. "I don't know how you people do it, but we usually toast before we drink, and I propose we toast to the newlyweds, but not before the groom has said his speech."
"Come again?" Erik raised his head in alarm.
"I'm dying to hear wedding ceremony platitudes come out of your mouth specifically, buddy. If you rob me of this, I will leave disappointed and inconsolable."
Erik stared at him for a second. "I don't remember what I did to deserve this, but knowing myself, I probably did something."
"Everything", Yana whispered next to him, and Erik let out something resembling a chuckle. Then, to everyone's surprise, he took his glass and raised it. He decided he wouldn't go so far as to stand up.
"Right. I will say something. I frankly didn't expect Alina to agree to this at all, let alone that you would all be so kind to indulge me, so I have nothing planned. You are all very good people, I'm grateful to you all, and I won't forget it. I intend to make my wife as happy as I possibly can, for the rest of my life." he lingered for a moment, looking unsure, then put his glass down.
"No, that is all", Erik concluded when he felt Alina tugging on his sleeve.
"Yes, darling? If you want to, you can do it yourself, you know?"
"I wouldn't mind that at all", Alina smiled, adjusted her dress, and stood up raising her glass.
"When I moved here, I thought I was on my own. I was fully prepared to succeed on my own, and fully convinced I didn't need anybody. I was fully prepared to build others' lives and make them happy, never asking for anything for myself.

But then, a strange thing happened - I fell in love for the first time in my life. I fell in love so many times, over and over again each day. I learned to see love everywhere I go and accept it, where I was until now saving it for others. I'm glad I had the chance to marry for love, and not for money or my elders' expectations, or social class. I'm glad my family can be here on my wedding day, even though none of you had to come through the pressures of societal convention. I'm glad we're all here because of love. I'm glad we did all of this so completely backward because all I wanted from my wedding - when I even thought about it - was love, bared from all pretense and tradition and all the other things so painfully boring, exhausting, and unimaginative. Thank you all for coming and making it come true. I truly love you all."
"That was beautiful, cousin", Nikola clapped.
"It was!" Yana smiled.
"Yes, now sit down", Amelija pulled her down.
"You're embarrassing yourself", Nikola added.
"No, I'm convinced", Jack said, raising his glass again. "To these two, Erik and Alina, may they live happily and never change. Or maybe change a little."
After roughly half an hour of silence interrupted only by the clanking of dishes, Nikola turned to Alina. "So, you must be quite valued at work for them to allow you to take days off like this?"
"Oh?" Alina raised her eyebrows. "Yes, I suppose so. I'd say I'm useful."
"I always thought you'd be good at it."
"Well, it is my life's calling."
"What's next?" Nikola smiled. "Are you going to stay in that school? I'm sure you could move up in the world, with your zest and attitude."
"For now. I like it here. I don't know how long I'll stay there- maybe one day I'll have my school, I don't know."

"You could always go to college", Nikola pointed out. "I mean if you're eager to keep your streak of big life changes."
"I-" Alina stopped with her mouth open. "I-"
"New York does have women's colleges. Things are not the same as they were in London ten years ago - not to mention, you don't need your father's signature anymore, now that you're married."
"I- I mean- that is- I haven't thought about it before", Alina blushed, looking

completely befuddled.
"Right, but it wouldn't be a problem, I think?" Nikola looked at Erik. Nikola witnessed years of Alina bumping into obstacles on her way to making a career and fighting for her independence; if he could do something to help her with it, even if causing an uncomfortable situation, he'd do it.
"What?" Erik looked back with unease. "Why are you asking me?"
"In case she needs her husband's signature."
"And you think I am the one who won't let her-" Erik started, his voice increasing in both pitch and speed, and Alina interrupted.
"Leave it, Nikola. I haven't decided yet what I want, and that's it. And I won't decide today, that's for sure."
"Alright", Nikola smiled at Erik apologetically. "I just wanted to ask."
Erik said nothing, fury still flashing from his eyes.
"Did you know there's a lot of fireflies around your house?" Nikola tried again.
"I did", he replied. "I've been out at night quite a lot."
"They're adorable."
Erik took a deep breath. This wasn't a good moment to settle this matter. Nikola had been incredibly kind to him until now, and he didn't want to lose that. Why are these people so good at faking things? Friends one moment, threat another. What do you think of me?
"I'm sorry", Nikola said again later, after Piotr was already asleep and alcohol sparkled in the eyes of Erik's companions. He could feel his blood warming up, and his mind quieting down; it took him a moment to realize what Nikola was apologizing for.
"I didn't think you'd forbid her", Nikola said, leaning on the wall of Erik's house. "Or I would not have come to the wedding. I realize now I've offended you."
"It's fine", Erik said. Alina and Amelija were teaching Yana how to play some sort of game on the street outside their house. Erik didn't fully understand it, but it involved throwing balls to roll towards a significantly smaller ball. He was too drunk to follow who was winning, but then, so were they. Jack was appointed to be the judge, but he seemed more interested in making them all bicker and forget what was going on whenever he could.
"I must admit this is one of the sweetest weddings I've been to", Nikola said, smoking as he watched Alina loudly accuse her sister of cheating. "It's

been about twelve hours since you two were married, and there's six more to go before we leave. Why are you not celebrating with us?"
"I am celebrating", Erik felt his ears get hot with anger again. "What are you talking about?"
"Well, you don't seem to be particularly relaxed with all of us here."
"I'm not", Erik said, not sober enough to bother lying. "But, to be fair, that has nothing to do with you."
"I want to see those fireflies again before I leave", Nikola suddenly said, straightening up and turning to leave without preamble. "Come with me."
Erik followed without question.
"Fireflies were one of the many animals I was obsessed with as a child", Nikola rambled. "I loved them so much, I caught several of them into a jar I filled with sticks and leaves. They all died within a day."
Erik nodded, following silently.
"These things happened several times when I was a kid until I grew older and realized if I love something so much, I shouldn't keep killing it in my attempts to keep it near me. So, I decided I would be the one to get close to nature, instead of ripping parts of it away to bring home with me."
"That's interesting."
"Do you have any other family, aside from Antoinette Giry?" Nikola asked carefully. They were now walking through waist-high bushes as he stopped to look at fireflies now and then. He was uncharacteristically silent, and even put out his cigarette so as not to upset the insects.
"No. Only her. She's my adoptive mother; we don't share any blood ties."
"And before she adopted you?"
"Before that, I was nothing."
Nikola stopped and turned. "You mean to say, nobody? I'm sure that's normal. We're all nobodies as children."
"No, I know what I said," Erik said, turning around him. They were still fairly close to the road, but streetlights were not very bright in this part of the suburbs. They were now in near-complete silence, no longer hearing the voices of the rest of their friends. Fireflies buzzed quietly and happily around them, illuminating little round bubbles in otherwise near-complete darkness. "Yes, you were right. I doubt you could ever get something like this if you kept them in a jar."

"It's because they're happy", Nikola smiled, barely visible, with slight childish drunkenness still in his voice. "We came to them."
Erik sat on his chair, alone and awake, as the others drifted off into sleep around him. He pondered the thought that there were so many people in his house now, peacefully asleep and relaxed as he listened to the sound of their deep breathing. He wouldn't be able to sleep with all of them here, and he mourned for a moment the fact he may never feel as much at ease as they seemed to be with each other. But they were all here for him - for Alina, primarily, but they were here to celebrate his wedding as well, which was thought almost impossible to fathom. All of these people were given to him on a silver platter and he wondered if he would ever be able to fully process the immensity of the change that happened to him in the past few years.
In the silent hours of the night as everyone else was sleeping, Erik sat down by candlelight and the dim outside light of streetlamps and wrote a letter to his mother.
Dear Antoinette,
I don't quite know how to start with this. We got married yesterday. It was unreal, and I haven't been able to sleep. To be fair, there are all these people - Alina's sister and cousin, and Piotr - still sleeping in my house, so it's not really that I even have somewhere to sleep. To my surprise, I'm glad they're all here.
I miss you. I've been thinking about you all day. I wish you could have been here to see it. I know we haven't always been on the best of terms, I know I wasn't a pleasant young man to manage, and I haven't always made your life easier. I resented you for things you couldn't give me and things I never even told you I needed; I held it against you for not knowing any better than to let me live five floors underground and spend my days in frightened isolation rather than force me to face the world. I know you did the best you could, and with some distance now I can tell you I don't think any of this is your fault - I never did; but still, for a long time I resented you for abandoning me and, eventually, sending me away. This was unfair of me, I know because it was me in the end who insisted to keep the distance and lock myself away, but I wanted to say it nevertheless. Now that I have some clarity, it seems to me more that you and I have kept each other at a distance for eleven years: I kept you at arm's length out of fear I might lose you forever if you ever get too close. I can only guess what made you act the same; perhaps I never really let you know how important you were to me

and how much I wanted to join you upstairs, in your daylight-tinted world. Perhaps I was wrong and you forgot about me through my decade in Paris, but it's my wedding day and I'm feeling sentimental, betting on the possibility that you will meet me halfway when you read this very embarrassing vomit of words and feelings.

I'm mature enough now to tell you that I miss you and I never thought all this distance would bring us closer together. I hope we'll meet again. I've been focused on surviving all this time, and only today do I realize I'm here to stay; I had always sort of assumed our goodbye, as well as my runaway status, was to be forever. But seeing these people, Alina's family, scattered across the world and always waiting to meet again nevertheless, has made me realize that things may not be as clear-cut in black and white as I tend to see them. Maybe one day, we'll meet out in the open, and there will be no reason to hide. Maybe you'll come to see a concert or opera of mine. Maybe I'll come and visit you at your house and bring presents as these people do, instead of hiding in your room and refusing to talk.

I hope you knew, even though I never said it, I loved you all these years from the moment I met you, even though I avoided you half the time.

I don't know what's gotten into me. If you get this letter, it means I sent it before I had a chance to get some sleep and know better.

Until we meet again someday,

Erik

Approximately one hour before dawn, Erik realized that they wouldn't be waking up. They were all tired, slightly drunk, and had gone to bed very late; there was nothing to wake them on time for the ship. He would have to be the one waking them all up, which he wasn't looking forward to, but he had a feeling they wouldn't prefer getting stranded in a strange land because of his social awkwardness.

Alina was sleeping soundly and Erik wasn't eager to wake her up and make it her problem again. He walked over directly to Nikola, standing over the man's slightly-curled-up form, and wondered what the most painless way to wake a man up might be. Erik suddenly had a thought: Alina had been in this situation back when they first met, trying to wake him up from various unpleasant dreams and terrors, and he wondered if she felt like this while she thought about how to go about it, and before he'd wake up either screaming in terror or cursing at her to leave him alone.

It never occurred to him before how strange it had to be for her, but it

occurred to him now when he realized he'd be mortified if this man woke up and cursed at him to leave him alone.
"Nikola", he tried optimistically, keeping his voice soft. "Wake up."
Nikola showed no sign that he heard him.
Erik tried again, poking Nikola's shoulder with a finger as he whispered. "Wake up?"
Nikola flinched a little but kept sleeping.
"Nikola", Erik gripped the man's shoulder firmly with his hand, trying to shake him a little. He had a feeling that would work. "Wake up."
Nikola's head shot up, and his eyes found Erik with the immediate alertness of someone used to sleeping somewhere not entirely safe.
The whole thing was uncanny.
"Your ship", Erik managed, quickly pulling his hand away. "You have to catch your ship."
Nikola straightened in his spot on the couch with remarkable grace for someone so sleepy. "Ah. I thought you were waking me up to tell me I need to grab my gun and run for the bushes."
"Sorry", Erik mumbled.
"Well, it worked." Nikola rubbed his eyes.
"I'm not the most pleasant sight to wake up to, but I was the only one awake, so-"
"Whatever are you talking about?" Nikola yawned. "What time is it?"
"Five thirty."
"How much do we have to hurry?"
"You're fine. Just wake up Amelija and get ready. The dock is not that far - you can catch a carriage nearby."
"Alright", Nikola stood up and automatically looked for his cigarettes, then stopped. "I should probably smoke less, now that the festivities are over. Do you happen to have any coffee?"
"I can make some."
"Where's the rest of them?" Nikola looked around.
"Alina and Amelija are sleeping in Alina's room. Yana left home after you fell asleep - I think Jack stayed with her; he lives further down the island - Piotr fell asleep on my bed, we left him there. He wanted to see Amelija leave."
"Is that kid so advanced that he can wake up at six just to wave at a big boat?"

"I don't know. The point is that we let him know, I suppose."
Nikola sat at the kitchen table, trying to clear his head. "It's a whole little family, the lot of you. All very close together. All practically living together."
Erik wondered if he should ask him what he meant by it. "Is that bad?"
"No, on the contrary. I think it's very sweet. I no longer have such a tight-knit group of friends", Nikola admitted. "I'm… away too often for too long. At least I think that's why."
Erik thought about it. "I don't think it happened on purpose - I certainly wasn't giving my best, back then, to keep them all around me. I think we had to be like this to survive. It was winter when we arrived - we had nothing, and it was so cold that Alina's eyelashes froze on her face. We had to do something, and so Yana let us stay in her kitchen. Otherwise, I don't know, if it had been summer, perhaps I would have left them all and gone to find my luck. And then none of this would have happened; if only we'd waited until spring, as they usually advise you to do with cross-Atlantic trips."
"That makes perfect sense", Nikola remarked. "A lone wolf will become a pack animal when winter hits. When nature periodically tries to kill us, we turn to each other. It's a simple evolutionary truth that we romanticize because it's nicer, it's nicer to think in terms of love and friendship than to admit we'd soon all be dead without each other. As if love itself was some sort of mysterious spiritual choice between the right and the sinful, and not a biological imperative that we feel every second of our lives? But that's always how it starts, and there's no shame in admitting it. The complicated - and more romantic - part starts when you're already in a pack and start to wonder: what now? Sorry if I'm rambling."
"I see," Erik took Alina's coffee pot off the fire and put it on the table, as well as some cups. "Here you go."
"Ah, thank you." Nikola poured himself the biggest amount of coffee Erik had seen someone pour in his life. Aside from Alina.
"I think Alina will be very sad about you leaving", he started carefully.
"We will all be; Amelija will be devastated. I'm sorry we don't get to see each other more often - we were all so close as kids."
"I didn't really understand it before, but now I do", Erik continued. "If… your travels lead you somewhere on this continent again, you're very welcome to visit."

"Amelija and me?" Nikola asked. He was surprised by this sudden invitation from his withdrawn host.
"I meant you specifically. I know I couldn't stop Amelija from coming again even if I wanted to." he paused. "It's all a joke. I didn't mind having her here. I know - Alina has told me - people tend to think I'm cold and distant, and it's sometimes - well, mostly - true, but not this time. So, I just wanted to make that clear."
"Well, thank you", Nikola smiled, sipping his coffee. "I'll be sure to bother you again, then."
As Nikola went to wake up his cousins, Erik decided to hold his promise and made his way to his bedroom.
"Piotr", he said softly. "Piotr, they're leaving. If you want to say goodbye, you can."
"Где мама?" Piotr asked in Russian, stirring and still half-asleep.
Erik sighed. "Дома. ты хочешь пойти домой?"
"Да."
"Alright", he lifted the child gently. "Home to mom it is. Say goodbye to your friends on the way."
Erik carried Piotr, who waved sleepily over his shoulder to Amelija and Nikola, off to Yana's house. Yana, also half asleep, took him and disappeared into the bedroom.
Erik looked around. Jack was sleeping in Yana's kitchen, covered in the same blankets she once gave to Erik, curled up into himself in a way Erik had not seen from him before.
"Jack", Erik called, shaking him gently. "Jack. They are leaving. I just thought you might want to know."
"I don't", Jack remarked, not even opening his eyes.
"Alright. I'll be off then. You know where we'll be."
"Duly noted."
Alina and Amelija both sat in their corners as the carriage drove them to the dock, sulking silently and looking dejected. Nikola gave his best to chat his way out of the awkward situation, but none of his fellow passengers in the carriage seemed interested.
Amelija and Nikola offered their hands to Erik politely as they walked the short way to the docks, commenting on how much they enjoyed their stay, how glad they are to have met him, and how he simply must come to visit them at some other time. It rang a bit hollow on the chilly autumn morning.

"Maybe someday", he said. "You're welcome to come again, in any case."
"And then we'll hear your concerts?" Nikola asked.
"Speak for yourself", Amelija smirked as she carried the least heavy of her bags. "I heard him already."
"I'm so jealous! Is he good?" Nikola asked, obviously trying to brighten up the mood.
"Yes, he's fantastic. You should be jealous."
"I'm going to miss you so much", Alina finally said when they were already stopping on the docks. "Both of you. Be sure to visit again."
"Of course, we will", Nikola took her hand in his. "We're family. Even though you decided to run away and abandon us."
"I didn't-"
"I'm joking, dear cousin. We'll see you again, don't worry."
"Amelija-" Alina started, but Amelija interrupted her.
"Enough. I know what you're going to say, and I don't want a scene. I will miss you too. I hope we can do this again next summer."
Alina's cheeks were streaked with tears. She gave her best to hold it back, sniffing as she nodded.
"I can't take it, Alina", Amelija sighed. "Hold it together. I promise to be back soon."
"You better be", Alina sniffed. "Or I'm coming to get you", she laughed as they hugged one more time.
Erik watched the whole scene unfolding from the side, feeling at the same time overwhelmed and excluded. Overwhelmed by their free display of emotions in such a public space, and excluded from the lifetime of history they had between them when to his surprise, Nikola looked at him one more time before he left. Amelija was distracted taking out their tickets and climbing the narrow steps, and he turned around taking care not to lose his balance with the heavy bags.
"It was good meeting you, brother-in-law", he said, his smile wrinkling the fine lines around his dark eyes and mouth. His eyes darted between Erik and something just to his left, and he would probably have realized someone was standing next to him if he was more focused.
Erik stared after him for a second in stunned silence. "Likewise", he finally managed.
"That has to be the most likable man I've ever met", Jack commented quietly next to him. "What a goddamn bastard. Couldn't hate him even if

you tried."
Erik turned to him, pondering if he should ask what the hell Jack was doing, hiding next to him instead of going after Amelija.
"What did you drag me out here for?" Jack asked, looking at Amelija as she boarded the ship. "What are we hoping to achieve?"
Erik didn't want to point out he didn't exactly drag him, but… "I don't know. I thought you might have an idea."
Jack shrugged. "I don't. Hard as it is to imagine, I have something called self-respect, and I know how to quit when someone isn't interested. I'm here, hell knows why, but I got my closure and I'm leaving now."
"Alright", Erik managed. He didn't see the point in it anymore. Amelija was already on the boat, waving at Alina; Jack was already turned with his back to it and ready to leave. Torn between meddling too much and not meddling at all, he managed not to achieve anything other than annoying both of his friends involved; perhaps, he thought, he should have picked one approach and stuck to it with conviction.
At that moment, Amelija must have finally seen the outline of Jack's messy brown hair in the crowd as Erik leaned in towards him to say something - he didn't know what, perhaps that he was sorry, that he'd misjudged everything completely, and that he wanted to help -
Amelija, possessed by some sudden hysteria, straightened out like a broom when she saw him and jumped on the fence, leaning over as she kept herself steady with her hands on the rails.
"JACK!" Amelija screamed from the top of her lungs. "Jack! I love you! Come see me in Zagreb!"
Jack jolted and turned halfway around to look at Erik first with a look of pure fury on his face. Erik didn't have the time to even process it as Jack stared him down. Jack turned all the way to face the boat and Amelija who was still shouting from it.
"I love you! Come with me to Zagreb!"
"I don't want to anymore", he shouted back, putting his hands around his mouth.
Amelija went silent for a moment, then slowly climbed down from the fence.
"Unless you marry me when I arrive", he added.
Amelija's face was now reflecting his annoyance.
"You've brought me to the brink of sanity! You need to get your head out of

the clouds and start considering me as well!" he shouted. "You expect me to cross the Atlantic and then half of Europe just to be a guest in the swamps and cornfields?"
People around, amused by the exchange, were starting to giggle. The ship, after a few blaring signals from its horn, was starting to inch away from the dock.
"Fine!" she screamed one more time. "Fine! I'll marry you when you arrive! If you stop being such a child about it!"
The people listening were still thoroughly amused, with a few of them clapping and whistling when she said it.
"I'll be there by New Years' day", Jack replied, smiling with obvious self-satisfaction. He waved at her, turned to wink at Erik, and walked back with a slight skip in his step, not turning back once.
Nikola waved back at him, trying not to burst into laughter at Amelija equally touched and mortified by what had just happened.
For better or worse, at least Alina looked happy for the first time that day. A slight breeze ruffled their hair as they went back, picking off the first falling leaves and bringing with it the smell of firewood.

Chapter 50: Small

Shadows danced around the walls. Somehow, lighting more candles when the shadows got too long never seemed to do much. He hated the way they flickered even though there wasn't much of a draft in his house. He hated how he could never be sure if a shadow moved slightly because of the flickering light, or because his mind was twisting into itself again. He forced himself not to cast any sideways glances. He didn't want to know. He ignored the things that shifted in the corner of his eye like his life depended on it.

Someone once told him, he couldn't remember who, that his life depended on it.
The young girl looked at him with sad brown eyes. He couldn't focus on her properly. He knew her from somewhere but didn't know where. He couldn't remember how she got there, or why they were now sitting across from each other in this dark room.
He could swear a shadow behind her extended her arm in his direction, but the girl remained sitting still.
"What are you doing down here?" she said. "I'm lost. Can you help me get back?"
He felt his heart beating against his ribcage so hard. He couldn't move. He couldn't move. He wanted to move, but he couldn't. He should tell her that, but his mouth wouldn't listen.
"This place is dead, but you're not. I can hear your heart beating. Why are you still here?" her voice sounded alarmed. Her eyes were big and glassy with tears, and he saw something terrible and monstrous-looking reflected in them. Was something standing behind him? Or was it him?
Erik woke up with a gasp and a flinch.
When his vision cleared and his limbs regained their full functionality, he turned his head to his left to see if his outburst went unnoticed.
His wife was sleeping soundly, unmoving. Slowly and carefully, he crossed

over her on all fours and crawled out of the bed. He managed to avoid accidentally snagging on her massive pool of hair as he propped himself up on his elbows.

Without a sound, he got down on all fours and then lowered himself onto the floor, turning onto his back before he crawled under the bed. He remained there, looking at the dark underside of the bed above him.
"I'll be back before you wake up", he whispered.
The world was small and dark down in the narrow space. He could stay here until he gathers all of the loose threads of his mind.
He'll need his composure today.
"Good day, sir, although you don't seem to be having one", said Caroline sitting at the reception desk as Erik entered past her. He no longer had to sign his name every time he arrived; she'd just wave at him and let him pass.
"Pardon me?" He stopped and turned. She seemed to be reading another one of her romance novels and penny dreadfuls, head down and glasses pushed low on her nose. How did she know?
Caroline looked at him over her glasses. She had the mannerisms of a much older woman than she was, and gray eyes similar to Antoinette.
"I'm guessing the distress I'm seeing on everyone's face today means Heidel is starting orchestral rehearsals on his notorious pet project?"
Erik froze for a second, fighting the urge to check the strings of his mask. His nerves were already frayed enough. "And you can see the distress on my face?" he pointed at his head.
"Oh, no. But your posture makes up for it." Caroline looked him up and down, entirely unbothered as he automatically straightened his spine.
"Why is the project notorious?" Erik asked carefully.
"Well, Heidel is very excited about it, and whenever Heidel is excited about something there's a decent chance the students won't have any time to breathe or do anything else - or get to go home before 9 p.m. for about a month at least." she turned a page, looking at him again. "And me too, because I'm the one who has to lock the place after them."

"I see." Erik blinked. "Do… you want me to tell him to finish earlier so you can go home?"

"Oh, I wouldn't dare ask that, sir", she let out a sarcastic little gasp. "Especially if he asks you where you got that idea. This is not a very secure job, you know?"
"Alright", he shrugged. "I'll see what I can do, but I won't promise anything. I don't know when I'll have the chance to talk to him."
"Thank you, sir. Not that I asked." Caroline winked. "Good luck today. If Heidel starts being too much, well, you know", she waved her hand, "I can hide you in a broom closet or somewhere he won't think to look for you."
Erik's eyes visibly lit up. "I might take that offer. Do you have keys to every room in this place?"
Caroline looked somewhere between worried and amused. "I do. And I'm very prone to losing them at the most convenient time."
Erik paused, holding himself back. She would probably be worried if I started cackling like a madman. "This day is not that bad, now that I think about it."
"No, you're right, it got much better all of a sudden. Now, sir, I would hurry if I were you. Mr. Riley is waiting for you."
"Right, thank you", Erik waved at her, jumping over two stairs at once as he made his way quickly to Oliver.
Did something just happen? Am I becoming a part of this place?
Are they taking me for one of them already?
"Welcome back! Our newly married man!" Oliver smiled sincerely as Erik entered. He got up from his seat by the piano and offered Erik his hand. "Congratulations! Jack told me. Don't worry, you didn't miss much."
"Thank you", Erik mumbled.
"Was it everything you wanted it to be?" Oliver asked. "I won't ask for details. Unless you're itching to say, of course."
"I… got married, and uh, it was on short notice, but thankfully everyone indulged me", Erik stammered. "It was… very beautiful."
"Very nice", Oliver smiled, shaking loose strands of hair from his face. "I knew I wanted it done, but I didn't think I'd enjoy the actual process."
"I've heard that from several people already. But you enjoyed it?"
"Very much."
"Hah", Oliver laughed. "Are you still under the spell? We could put this off until tomorrow."
"Actually", Erik bit his lip, "yes and no. Orchestral rehearsals are starting today, and… I was wondering if I could ask you something."

"Hm?"
"I have to be there. Well, I want to be there."
"Of course, by all means, go ahead. I can manage on my own."
"I was going to ask if you wanted to go with me", Erik somehow forcefully dragged out of himself. "I don't trust myself to have a reasonable opinion. I know myself too well."
"You want me to be the voice of reason?" Oliver raised his eyebrows.
"Yes. In a way." No, not at all. I just want reassurance. Please I don't want any sort of reason I want someone next to me when I hear it for the first time so I can anchor myself in reality and
not unravel completely-
"What a bad idea. I'm never reasonable about music at all! I like it too much!" Oliver remarked. "If you want constructive criticism, I'm sure you and Heidel together can think of a more thorough analysis than I can."
"I don't want that. I just want a voice of… well…"
"I understand", Oliver stood up, grabbing his cane. "I understand. You could have just said it, you know."
"I really couldn't."
Erik led Oliver through the auditorium in hopes of finding a good seat where he'd be able to see what was going on on the stage without drawing any unnecessary attention to himself. Erik would have preferred to go completely unnoticed, but dragging Oliver through some dusty corridor would be incredibly selfish of him; first of all, Oliver wouldn't be able to find his way in there without Erik's help, and secondly, Oliver didn't seem like the adventurous type unlike Alina and seemed to prefer sitting in comfortable spots. And so he found himself leading Oliver to the very back and sitting next to him in a normal seat, not obviously visible but not hidden either. It occurred to him this might have been the first time he did something like that.
The orchestra was already on the stage, tuning and sharing sheet music, and Heidel's conducting students were sitting obediently at his side as he gave them quiet instructions and pointed at certain parts in his notes. Heidel noticed Erik and waved, then said a few words to his students and the orchestra after which they all visibly tensed and straightened like little wooden sticks, casting frightful glances at both Erik and Oliver. Erik cursed internally; his hope of remaining unnoticed was crushed before the rehearsal even started. So much for uninterrupted-

"Oliver?" Erik whispered. "Oliver, why are they all so… small?"

"Sorry?" Oliver leaned in. "You'll have to explain that one. How are they small?"
"They are… these are college students?" Erik ran his hands down his masked face. "Half of them are still teenagers! The other half is around Daniel's age!"
"Ah, well, they're young college students, I suppose. The conservatory can take kids as young as sixteen or even fifteen if they're promising, though I hear that's pretty rare. So if they're around eighteen or twenty, technically they could have a few years of college under their belts. Do you think they won't be good enough for you? I wouldn't think so. These are talented young-"
"Why did Heidel think it was a good idea to assign this symphony to teenagers?"Erik hissed. "Isn't there anything, I don't know, more hopeful or romantic or playful for them to do? Shouldn't they be playing The Magic Flute or The Nutcracker?"
"Heidel told them it was a voluntary project for extra-curricular credit. I guess they liked it." Oliver was now frowning at him. "You've… been young, right? You've been that age yourself?"
"I don't see how that's-"
"And were you very hopeful, romantic, and playful between the ages of sixteen and twenty?" Oliver asked gently.
Erik paused as if he'd just been hit by a brick. "No. I just don't think it's-" he sighed. "It's different."
"I'd say, there are plenty of young people who will want to play something hopeful or heroic or romantic - and they're probably rehearsing some other composition right now. The ones who are here likely heard something they liked in this symphony." Oliver shrugged. "Some kids are just a little bit morbid, that's normal."
After a few moments of silence from his left, Oliver grew worried. "I meant that in the best possible way, of course."
"Of course."
"Were you hoping I'd say it's not as bad as you think?"
"...no."
"It's not as bad as you think. But it's still a little bit… dark."
"Mmh." Erik was grateful for the fact Oliver couldn't see him; he would

have felt embarrassed if the man asked him why he was pulling at his hair.
"They're all so afraid of him." some of the students still occasionally cast uneasy glances at Erik's seat in the back of the auditorium.
"Of whom? Heidel?"
"Yes." will they stop looking at me if I tell them I'm more afraid of them than they are of me?
Oliver shifted. "Everyone's afraid of Heidel. He's a living legend in their eyes. I wouldn't worry about it too much."
"He's not exactly fighting against it, either."
"Well, yes, he is very strict. We were all afraid of him once before we got used to him."
"They didn't even notice us, but now that he's pointed to us, they're afraid of us too." Of me. They're afraid of me. It took them all three seconds to stop glancing at Oliver.
"So? It's all normal. We're twice their age. Well, at least I am, but let's not think about that too much."
"They're not looking at you", Erik blurted out, then regretted it when he felt his cheeks and ears get hot.
"What?" Oliver turned to him, frowning in confusion. "What do you mean? What are they looking at?"
"Nothing, forget it. It doesn't matter."
Erik kept staring at them in distress, hoping the buzzing in his burning ears would die down, and Oliver could sense that something was wrong. He tried again. "You know… they're not afraid of Heidel. They respect him, yes, but they're not taking him that seriously. As soon as he turns around and goes on a break, they'll laugh about it all. It's just like every other school. Heidel is strict and full of himself, and sometimes unnecessarily cold. He takes his job seriously. But he's not cruel; he can be reasoned with."
"Mhm." and what about me? Can I be reasoned with?
"Erik, buddy, are you alright?"
"I'm thinking", Erik replied. "How… What about Daniel?"
"Daniel sees Heidel much worse than he is. I... think there may be something more to it from his perspective."
"And how am I supposed to make the two of them cooperate?" Erik hissed as the orchestra finished tuning. Heidel was getting ready, and his students were attentively watching him. Erik could hear him say to the conducting

students not to forget to keep an eye on his left hand as well.
"Isn't that a worry for another day? Daniel isn't here today. Let's focus on the matter at hand."
"So? How do you like it so far?" Oliver asked as the students relaxed, turning to talk among themselves and putting down their instruments.
Heidel, like most smokers, was always very punctual about when to send students on a break. "I can hear they did their homework - it's still a bit rough, they're not a unified orchestra yet, but it's got a good foundation, huh?"
He could not hear any sound at all coming from his left side.
"Erik? Are you still here?"
"We need to stop this", he heard from somewhere below. Erik was doubled over with his head between his knees and his hands buried in his scalp. "I changed my mind. I don't want it anymore. Tell them to stop."
Oliver blinked in surprise. "You didn't like it?"
"I hate it."
"Why?"
"It's all wrong. They don't… it's not… I don't know. It's so many things. It's not what I thought it would sound like at all."
Oliver was, for a moment, too stunned to speak. "Is that… not why we're here? So you can tell Heidel's conducting students what to do?"

Once again, he couldn't hear anything at all. Erik was still doubled over, staring at the floor.

"This silence is grating on my nerves, buddy." Oliver tried bending his head down to discern where the voice was coming from.
"Sorry", he heard a reply.
"Could you maybe tell me what the problem is, and I'll tell Heidel about it if you don't want to?" Oliver tried.
"No, that would be cowardly. I'll tell him myself. We're calling it off. I'm sorry for the time you wasted."
Oliver was a fairly patient man. He rarely lost his composure, and any anger he might feel towards people around him rarely lived long enough to escape his mouth. He felt bad for the melodramatic poet currently whining somewhere close to the floorboards, more than he felt annoyed by the self-absorbed, one-sided conversation he was currently the sole hostage of.

"Well…" Oliver thought about it. "But who's gonna tell the orchestra? If you do it like this, they're going to think it's their fault you're calling it off. They're gonna assume they're not good enough."
Erik stared at the floorboards. To be fair, he couldn't tell if it was their fault or not. They were still students; they were good students but not really on the level of the New York Philharmonic orchestra or other, established ensembles. On the other hand, he'd attended a few of Conservatory's concerts by then, and they never struck him as bad, just occasionally young and unpolished; surely they couldn't have forgotten all they knew all of a sudden? Erik, although hyper-aware of every tiny mistake in every performance he'd ever heard, could let them go as long as the music made him feel something. As much as mistakes grated on his ears, as a listener, it was not perfection he was after so much as the dreamy, dissociated feeling of getting lost in something beautiful.
So the reason for the terror he was currently feeling in his chest, as unbearable as the thought was, was probably…
"My fault", he managed. "It's not their fault. It's mine. I didn't think it would sound like this once I heard it. I don't think it should be performed. It's a cacophonic mess, an embarrassment, and it doesn't belong on the stage. A musical genius like you and Daniel could save parts of it, but this… no. no. I can't do it. It has my name on it."
"It's normal to feel like this before your debut", Oliver remarked.
"If it's normal to feel like this before your debut, I'm surprised anyone ever writes more than one composition in their life", Erik replied.
"It gets better."
"Oh my God! I don't see how it will get better if it ends in disaster!" Erik finally sat up. The students had, thankfully, left for their break.
"It won't end in disaster", Oliver tried again. "It's a small production by college students. It's not even on a big enough scale to cause disaster. Haven't you already played this on piano for Heidel? And me? And Daniel?"
"It was different."
"Because?"
"I was playing it myself. I knew what I meant by it. I had it under… control… and I liked the way it sounded when I played it at home myself. I picked you two because I knew you would understand. I haven't played it to anybody else."

"Not your wife?"
"Just some parts. Long ago."
"Why not more? She didn't like it?"
"It wasn't… ready. I was afraid if she heard it when it wasn't ready, it would ruin her impression. But she did like it, yes, and I think she understood. My house is small, and not as harshly lit, and it sounded better there. I don't like how it sounds from this auditorium, played on the open stage. I don't like how they're playing it as if they're doing some sort of homework. I don't like how Heidel is conducting it like a project that has to sound palatable for an audience. It had some sort of magic to me before I heard it, as stupid as it sounds, and now I can see it's just noise made by a deranged amateur with grand ambitions and complete disregard for good taste."
"Erik", Oliver interrupted. "I'll be honest with you. I don't understand what's going on in your head, or why this is such a life-or-death matter to you. But if you're scared of people hearing your music and disliking it, that's normal. You'll just have to either deal with it until it gets better or calls this whole thing off and disappoint a whole lot of people who liked the symphony enough to accept this job voluntarily. Including an orchestra of, as you pointed out, frightened teenagers doing homework, Daniel who just started taking his life seriously, Heidel who has a lot of connections in this city, and me."
Erik felt a small, little, embarrassing tear in the corner of his eye. He rubbed his eyes to get rid of it. "I'm… sorry for the disappointment."
"I wouldn't hold it against you. But, yes, I like this symphony, I like being able to sit on a proper stage again and perform for people who come to listen to me. I like that I'm playing something new, and something I can relate to. I haven't had this chance in years. I'd rather not lose it if I can."
"I-" Erik stopped. There was no universe in which that confession wouldn't break his heart a little. "You're right. I'm acting juvenile. I don't have the right to offer you something and then take it away."
"Can we pedal back to reason? Isn't that why you asked me to come? If you don't like it now, there's plenty of time to change it. And the orchestra has plenty of time to get it to a level that's good enough for you. Whatever it sounds like to you now - it won't sound the same by the end."
"That's true."
"Can we agree to hold off impulsive decisions in the future until you've had the chance to think about it? This was stressful for both of us."

"That would probably be for the best if I could finally learn how to do it."
Earlier that day Alina hurried to her classroom with a little too much urgency, it seemed, because when she opened the door her children weren't jumping and bouncing off the walls or making an unthinkable racket; in fact, they smiled at her angelically as well as Emily who read the confusion on Alina's face with slight smugness.
"Welcome back, madame", she giggled, putting the chalk down and wiping her hands with a rag. "What should we call you now?"
"You can all keep calling me Alina for simplicity's sake." Please, for the love of all that is holy, do not call me Madame Giry.
"Alright, I'll be on my way, then. It was good teaching you, children, but now I'm giving you back to your teacher", Emily said with the kind of confidence Alina had not seen her exhibit until then. The children murmured goodbye, Miss Barnwell and Emily got ready to leave, stopping when she reached Alina at the door.
"I'd like to speak with you outside, just for a second", Alina asked, and Emily obliged, closing the door behind them.
"Can you explain to me how they are so calm all of a sudden?" Alina whispered.
"Oh, it's not all of a sudden", Emily smiled. "You see when you were on sick leave - after you were attacked - everyone heard what happened and refused to work with your class. Dowling gave them to me because I was the youngest and couldn't say no. I was working with them for about a week, and then I got them again yesterday. They're used to me by now."
"This class has always made an unthinkable mess, even when someone had to step in for a single hour! How did you do it?"
"I know a few things, Alina. I went to school. I'm not as incompetent as you all think I am."
"I- I'm sorry", Alina managed. "I didn't mean to" Emily did have a point. She was young, much younger than Alina, and she couldn't have had that many years of experience when Alina met her.
"I was a nanny before this. I know how to teach children, but last year I knew how to teach little well-behaved rich children. And no more than three at the time. Dowling hired me because he was hoping I'd somehow inject those manners in these little wild monkeys."
"Well, you adjusted remarkably well, then-" Alina peeked through the slit in the door at her students. They were all quite calm; they shuffled and talked

quietly among themselves, but that was it. They replaced me quite quickly. Good for Emily. But it still stings.
"They're dying for you to come back", Emily remarked. "They realized rather quickly how to get in my favor. But I can see they're bored. It's not normal for them to be this quiet."
"It's not", Alina replied. "I usually allow some ruckus, just enough to make them more engaged."
"Well, I'll let you get right back to it. I have my job to do. My classes start soon." Emily paused. "Dowling wants you to know he approved your sick leave, and he understands the family matters you had to attend to, but he won't tolerate it if these absences keep happening."
"Ah, alright. Alright. We can't start a school year without Dowling giving me an earful; what kind of a world will that be?" Alina sighed.
Emily bit her tongue not to say the obvious, maybe you deserve it, and instead decided to be a friend. "How was the wedding? Are you happy?"
"I am", Alina's face lit up a little. "It still feels unreal. But it was beautiful. Even my sister was there to see it before she left. Well, I should probably go back to work. Has Walter come back yet? I didn't see him in there."
"Walter… comes later. He's taking care of his younger siblings most mornings. He shows up at ten o'clock, I give him notes from earlier classes, and he silently sulks in the back of the class. Doesn't cause any problems, but doesn't say anything, either." Emily paused. "Maybe it would be better if you talked to him directly."
"Maybe, if he doesn't turn around and leave as soon as he sees me, as he's been doing lately."
"I'm sure you'll find some way to make it work", Emily hurried, not eager to bother with Walter any more than necessary. "You've been gone long enough for him to start missing you. Anyway, I should go. I'll see you on lunch break."
"Sure", Alina said, stepping back into the classroom to finally do her job.
"We survived that", Oliver remarked. "How are you?"
"Fine", Erik retorted. Students had packed up and left remarkably quickly; Heidel waited with Beatrice until some important-looking man who seemed to be her father came to pick her up. It was just the two of them, Erik and Oliver, in an empty auditorium now.
"You're a terrible liar. Has Daniel shown up? Do you know where he is?"
"No, and no. But I didn't expect him to, either. I'm not that optimistic."

"Hm", Oliver sighed. "It would be so much easier to resolve this conflict of theirs if he would show up. Sadly, our young friend is something of a coward. One of us might have to go talk to him."
"Not yet."
"No, not yet. We've had enough trouble for now. Do you want to go have a beer with me?"
"No- sorry. I don't like doing that." Erik replied awkwardly, then stood up as if cued to leave.
Oliver remained sitting, looking in his general direction.
"Maestro?" Oliver asked tentatively, leaning his head on his cane as he often did.
"Hm?" Erik paused. There was something different, unsure and slightly hurt in Oliver's tone, very unlike his normal jovial sassiness.
"Out of all the people in the world, you decided to invite me here with you today. I thought it was because we were becoming friends, but perhaps I was wrong - if I overstepped some line, I apologize. But I don't have the impression that your courtesy has been a matter of pity, or am I wrong?" Oliver asked.
"Pity?" Erik asked, grimacing. "No, I simply don't like public places or large groups. I hate spending my time around most people, so I avoid them.
"
"And me?" Oliver smiled an innocent smile. There was something decidedly kitten-like in his behavior, Erik noticed for the first time.
"You?" Erik swallowed. "No, not you. You don't bother me."
"Is there a reason for that? Something I'm doing to fray your nerves a little less?"
"Well", Erik hesitated, "you don't treat me like I'm different."
"And other people do?"
Erik paused. "Yes."
"I see", Oliver crossed his legs casually, patting his sleeve as if he was trying to remove some dust - a habit useless to him now. "It's because I can't see you, isn't it?"
Erik said nothing.
"You look different from other people", Oliver continued. "That much I can tell. I can't tell in which way - it's not skin color or race or nationality; I can't discern any specific racial prejudices in how people treat you. People treat you like you're something they haven't seen before. So it must be some

rare peculiarity that confuses them. Frankly, I am dying to know - but I've got a hunch you'll like me a little less after I find out."
"That might happen", Erik replied coldly, frowning under his mask.
"Then I won't ask, you or anyone else", Oliver concluded, tapping his cane on his leg again. "It would sadden me very much if you started liking me less."
Ironically, as soon as the words left Oliver's mouth, Erik felt a compelling urge to blurt out -
"I wear a mask over my face. It scares people. They can't read my facial expressions, and they keep wondering why I do it." He shrugged, forgetting Oliver couldn't see the gesture. "The rest of me isn't normal either, but I think this is the most obvious thing."
"I'll be damned", Oliver raised his eyebrows. "Your entire face?"
"Not quite - it's cut off above my mouth and jaw. And there are eyeholes, of course." it didn't matter anyway. If Erik hadn't told him, somebody else would have, sooner more likely than later. At least this way he had some control over it.
"What kind?" Oliver straightened with interest. "What kind of mask?"
"Just a plain white leather mask. No embellishments. It's just to cover my face."
"I see", Oliver chewed on his lip - Erik could not tell what he was thinking. "It's not a whim, is it? It bothers you how people react - it's not a thing you do just to be eccentric and notorious."
"Not a whim", Erik replied coldly.
"I understand", Oliver said. "I understand why looking different might make someone wary of others. And, if I may ask if you happen to enjoy my company, how did you expect me to know that if you refuse without explanation any advance I make towards us being friends? I could have just as well said okay, and left, and never asked about it again. A few years ago, I would have done exactly that."
"I-" Erik panicked. Most people around me never really asked, I suppose? They just kept appearing until I stopped complaining about it. "I don't know. What was the question again?"
"Do you want us to be friends or not?"
"I do!" Erik said a little too loudly for the empty room designed for good acoustics.
"And how was I supposed to know that?"

"I don't know - do people need a formal announcement? I thought it was pretty obvious."
"Sometimes it's obvious, and sometimes it seems like you want me to remain at a respectable distance. Both are fine with me, but how am I supposed to know what you want? Do you even know it?"
"I do", Erik said, then thought about it. "No, I've never thought about it before. I'm afraid I don't even know the difference."
"Are you f-" Oliver started, but Erik kept talking?
"Even people who are my friends are - well, often kept at a distance. To be honest, you are not the first who called me out on this. I simply liked you because you were very kind to me, always, and very easy to be around. But I never really thought about what I want from you, or what I owe you in return. What I do know is, I don't want to go to a bar with you, but I should have made it clear I have an aversion to bars and not you."
"Well, next time I can bring some booze here, and we can hide from Heidel and drink after rehearsals like back when I was a teenager." Oliver laughed.
"Oh, that sounds nice." Erik paused. I wonder if Caroline from the reception desk would lend me her keys for something like that. "If all else fails, that might even make Daniel magically appear."
"Walter, darling, could you wait a bit? I have some materials to give you from today's classes." Alina gently raised her voice through the rustle of students packing and leaving. Walter nodded, turning pale, and waited until everybody left to walk up to her desk.
"Yes?" Walter looked viscerally uncomfortable, with his hands in his pockets, shifting his weight and staring at some paper on Alina's desk.
"Are you alright, Walt? How have you been?" Alina asked.
"Sure, I'm fine." his face was unreadable, and he still wouldn't look her in the eye.
"Walter, I - I'm sorry things happened the way they did."
"You mean putting my dad in jail?" he looked at her. Alina felt the need to look away, but she managed to endure a few more seconds before she did.
"No", she said. "I- well, I can't say I'm sorry for that. I'm sorry for making a mess in your family and complicating things for the rest of you. I wish I knew a better way. I sued your father because I believe it's the right thing to do to protect us all, including myself, and I wouldn't take it back."
"Good", Walter said. "It would've been spineless if you'd just backed down now."

"Walter!" Alina warned, pointing a finger at him. Walter blinked and instinctively looked down, looking very, very small.
"You really shouldn't talk to teachers that way, Walt", Alina sighed, rubbing her forehead. "Yes, you're right, but that won't help you if you keep antagonizing your allies."
Walter smiled, relaxing a little. "I apologize, Teacher Alina."
"So, how are you?" Alina asked.
"I'm fine. It's quieter at home, but I have more stuff to do. I'll probably be missing some classes."
"That's fine, Emily told me. I'll adapt. You'll be welcome here whenever you can come."
"Thank you", he paused. "Hank wanted me to tell you… he and I talked… he wanted you to know that we didn't know my dad would, you know, attack you, or we would've stopped him. And he says I should tell you the rest of us are not like him."
"I know that, honey. I've always known." Alina paused. "You should know, I have some cakes left from my wedding party in my bag. Just in case you want to try some."
"So you married that weird guy, huh?" Walter relaxed as she handed him a napkin full of sweets. "How was that? I can't imagine getting married. I don't think I will."
"Well, nobody's forcing you to", Alina raised an eyebrow at him. "But it's nice."
"Eh. Has Amelija left already?"
"Unfortunately, yes."
"Too bad. I liked her. She was so mean sometimes; it was hilarious." Walter stuffed his face with cake. "I don't know what she was trying to prove, but it wasn't very convincing."
"Oh, it is, to some people." Alina laughed.
"And what now? You're gonna keep working?"
"Certainly."
"Why? If you can just relax and be a distinguished lady?"
"Well, I like it. Life's more interesting this way. I don't want to be stuck at home." And besides, last year's money won't last forever, and I would like my husband to get a chance to chase his dreams for a bit without worrying about what we'll eat every single day, you know?
"Fair, I wouldn't want to be stuck at home either", Walter concluded. "Hey,

so if I, sort of, became an engineer, that would be kinda interesting too right? I think I would like it. What do you think?"
"I think it's worth a shot", Alina agreed. The early autumn wind rustled the leaves outside, plucking a few of them from their branches and swirling them through the air.

Chapter 51: Keys to the Roof

Paris, 1885.

"Erik, you're in my closet again", Antoinette said as she entered her dressing room, not even looking inside the closet. She sat by her desk, stretching as she wrote notes for what she would have to do tomorrow.
"No", she heard from inside, "On the contrary, your closet is around me."
Pause.
"How did you know, anyway?"
"That there's a young man inside my closet? If you worked with young girls for as long as I have, you'd get good at sniffing out boys hidden in closets too." That was a complete and total lie. While Antoinette was good at sniffing out secrets, she had no way of knowing where Erik was at any given moment due to the absolute silence with which he moved around. She simply had a very good hunch for when he was there, for reasons she couldn't explain. It had been a while - he spent the last few months offended from when she didn't notice his house was flooding from burst pipes, and Antoinette had no idea what else she could say to apologize to him. Finally, she let him be, and it was only a matter of time before he would break and seek her out.
The door slowly opened, and Erik stepped out with no sound at all.
"How are you doing, sweetheart?" Antoinette asked.
"Fairly good. Are you going someplace?"
"Some of the production cast and crew are going to stay here for dinner. Younger members are going to be there too, my ballerinas, and the orchestra. You could stay around with me for a while, maybe- " She tried but knew it was futile as soon as Erik looked down to the floor, a dejected slump in his shoulders, his fingers twitching slightly.
"I won't go", he said. "Do you want to go?"
Antoinette's voice wavered. She was planning to go, to be honest. "No."
"Don't stay here for my sake if you don't want to!" Erik's eyes now finally

met hers, going from rejection to anger in a matter of moments.
"I don't like your tone!" Antoinette snapped back, ignoring the instant twitch in his body as she raised her voice. "I said I'm staying here, which means I want to!"
"Fine!" he crossed his arms, fuming silently and looking at some point in her wall; the twitch had moved to one of his eyelids.
"Sweetheart", she said, in a much gentler voice, and Erik's furious stance faltered. There was a gnawing voice in the back of her head - Antoinette was already stretched thin between her job and her little daughter, and she couldn't keep choosing between Erik and the whole rest of the world. But he seemed so young; with his hair finally growing after they chopped that tangled mass he had after she found him, and so painfully thin, shy, and constantly moody, in his head he was shifting between a child and something resembling an adult. He was right: she couldn't handle it either if he went outside and she saw him being hurt again. She was not ready to let him go. "Let's just have dinner. Just the two of us. It'll be fine. Do you want to come to my house? Meg is with her grandmother."
Erik looked back at her. "Your house?"
"What? It's not like I kicked you out of there, is it? You can come to my house if just this once."
Erik's return to Antoinette's old house after quite a while stirred a lot more in him than he thought it would. He forgot how warm it was here, how small, and how friendly the light from the little lamps was. He had spent the way here in thoughtful silence, and he remained silent as he looked around, at Antoinette's old clock and small couch with a wooden frame and legs, and soft cushions on it. Antoinette had rearranged her furniture since, making more room for her growing daughter and her things - she now had a small desk where Meg probably did her homework or drew with colored pencils or did whatever else Meg liked doing. He hadn't seen Meg since that incident with burst pipes; he wondered how she was doing. He looked at the paintings on the walls and caught a glimpse of his masked face in the wall mirror. He looked away on instinct, then glanced again. He looked so different from the last time he was here - aside from the mask and the dark skin around his eyes and unusually tall, thin frame, he looked… surprisingly decent. His hair and nails had finally stopped growing weird and falling out after a decade of malnutrition; his lips were not even cracked. He was still thin, but no longer looked like a dead man walking.

He was clean and his clothes were neat. He didn't look as beastly or as evil as he had imagined; although he thought he would still not pass for a normal person, at least he resembled a person at all. It was a good month for him. His head was quieter than it had ever been before and his life was settling into something close to comfortable. He knew it wouldn't last, but for this one moment, he could forget about that fact. He could pretend he was a wandering son coming home from college to his mother.1
Antoinette hung their coats on the hangers by her front door and went into the kitchen. She had some meat and stew prepared earlier, thankfully, because she didn't feel like bothering with it now. She laid it out on the table and started eating without much further ado. Erik would eat when he decided to, anyway.
Erik, possessed by some rare spark of sociability, sat across from her and after filling his plate, took a few slow, careful bites.
"I'm sorry you missed your dinner with the Opera staff", he admitted.
"I'm sorry you missed it", Antoinette replied. "You're a young man. I don't want you to spend your whole life in a dungeon. You could've at least sat somewhere by my side, even if you stayed in the shadows. Or you could have met someone, and made another friend."
Erik stared at his plate, trying to gather his patience for this conversation. "I don't think you understand. I don't want to spend my whole life in a dungeon, either. But what I want even less is to spend it in chains."
"No one will touch you again, as long as I live."
"You can't promise me that. You can't even promise I won't harm someone else, and neither can I. Let alone that nobody will ever harm me." he sighed. "It is what it is. It would be easier if you accepted that you can't protect me from everything."
Antoinette ate in silence. She was losing her resolve.
"I appreciate that you would try", Erik coughed. "Try to keep me safe. I do believe that you're trying, and I appreciate it."
"That will be enough for now, I suppose", she smiled without much joy. "I won't pretend I've been perfect so far, either."
"I didn't mean to make you unhappy. Do you want to do something else? You said you liked playing cards. Can you teach me to play cards?" he tried. Please, I love you, stop looking so unhappy to be around me.
"Oh, so you can beat me at yet another game? Alright, little ghost, let's see how fast you learn."

"Back when I was your age", Antoinette said, sipping her glass of wine and losing at canasta, "us girls used to play all sorts of card games in between rehearsals. I was always good at it."
"Well, not anymore, I suppose?" Erik smiled slightly.
"Ah, shut it. Anyway, I was… seeing this young man, at the time, before I met Lucien. I learned a bunch of new games, because his friends played them, and I taught them to the other girls. There was a whole epidemic of ballet girls playing cards, and it was embarrassing for the Opera's reputation if they caught us, and all my fault of course. Because I befriended a flock of military men. I also taught the girls how to smoke cigarettes, also because of them, but that never caught on. They were too expensive for us."
"How did that end?" Erik asked.
"Well, first we got an unpleasant tirade from our superiors, especially me, and then we got better at hiding our cards. And someone always kept watching in case the head of the ballet corpus showed up. Or the manager. Or, god forbid, the one cleaning lady who always told on us, for some reason that's beyond me. And now that I'm the head of the ballet corpus, I don't bother unless they're openly doing something they shouldn't in front of me."
"How do you get them to listen to you?" Erik asked. "All those girls- they're constantly talking and giggling, but they all go silent when you're in the room. How did you do that? Why are they so afraid of you?"
"Afraid of me?" Antoinette looked up. "Sweetheart, they are not afraid of me."
"They are a little bit, at least."
"Alright", Antoinette laughed. "A little bit afraid, yes."
"How do you do that?" Erik asked.
"I don't know. People have always listened to me", Antoinette shrugged. "My mother always said I have a commanding presence. I say something, and people take it seriously."
"How does it work? What do you do?" Erik asked. "It's important."
"Why is it important?"
"I asked first."
"Fine. I'll have to think about it." Antoinette thought for a moment. "I suppose I don't bore my students with tirades or over-explaining. I say what I mean to say clearly and loud enough to be heard, but not louder than that. It's up to them to make sure they've heard me. That's why they listen."

"That's not all."
"No, be patient. I know these girls look up to me because they know they can trust me. For every ounce of discipline I demand, they can be sure I will stand up for them if someone else from the management mistreats them. They can come to me for help, or tell me when they're in trouble. These are young adolescent girls- it's very important to them that other people approve of them; I was once like that, too. I'd like to give them a chance to enjoy their youth despite having to work so young. I don't mind what they are doing in their free time as long as they show up to work. The rules are clear, and they're the same for all of them", she thought about it some more.
"Ballet is a delicate art- balancing on the tip of your body's capabilities; if you don't push yourself enough, you won't get anywhere, but if you push yourself too hard, you'll get injured. I've been able to remain a ballerina for so long precisely because I knew that balance. I know the difference between tired and whining."
"Well, they don't seem to oppose you very often."
"I don't like to create unnecessary conflict over small things. Most of the time they can manage themselves; it's in their interest to get a good role, get praised, or get paid better. It's only when they're consciously slacking off or disturbing others that I have to raise my voice."
"I see."
"I established this years ago when I first became head of the ballet corps. Every new girl who comes, simply learns from the old girls what the rules are. I barely need to lift a finger anymore. Why is this important?"
Antoinette raised an eyebrow.
"It's… it's important to me. I've never seen someone command discipline without, well… draconic obedience."
"That's certainly a way to put it."
"Yes. Well. I thought it had to be possible, even as… as a kid, for another way to exist. But I've never actually seen it happen. Not until I met you."
"Well, it is. Loyalty and leadership are accomplished through people's hearts, not through the end of a whip. I've always tried to be the kind of mentor I needed at that age."
"I understand."
"And how are you going to use that knowledge?" Antoinette smiled.
"I won't", Erik felt his cheeks get hot under the mask. "I… am content where I am. I have no use for this information, but it gives me peace of

mind."
Antoinette laughed. "But if you ever get the chance, please pass on my legacy: ballet pedagogy and modified rules for canasta."
"What happened to the man you were seeing?" Erik asked carefully. He was never sure what kind of questions he could ask.
"Oh, him? Unfortunately, I broke his heart. It was a shame he was an entertaining fellow."
"Why would you break his heart?"
"Not on purpose", Antoinette shrugged with an uncharacteristic, guilty smile on her face. "You see, I fell in love with his friend, and so I left him. They fought it, but in the end, we all remained friends after I reasoned with them. He married one of my friends, and a few years later, I met Lucien. I stopped my shenanigans as soon as he proposed to me. And now, well, nobody would guess any of this when they see me, but I suppose I'm telling you."
Erik blinked.
"Would it help if I said I was a different person in my youth?" Antoinette winked at him. "A girl can allow herself a few years of reckless abandon before she settles down to be proper and responsible, right? It's not like I had a strict respectable family whose reputation I had to uphold. Nobody ever paid any mind to what I did in my free time."
"Was it your commanding presence?" Erik laughed, a short, awkward laugh. "That made all those soldiers fall in love with you?"
"Perhaps? They do tend to get a bit too attached to authority figures", Antoinette remarked, and Erik laughed for real. It was a rare sound.
As time went on, Antoinette told stories and Erik expressed proper disbelief at how irresponsible his strict and organized mother used to be, they completely forgot about how late it was until Erik, properly fed and relaxed for the first time in days, started leaning his head on his hand - then blinking, trying not to yawn, and losing his focus enough to also start losing at cards.
"The stagehands once played a prank on us, that I remember", Antoinette said. "They tied all of our dancing shoes together. It was a huge mess. We were all so late for our rehearsal. Nobody believed us. I will tell you how we got back at them, but right now, you need to go to bed."
Erik straightened. "No, I'm listening."
"You're really tired."

"I'm having fun", he admitted. "I don't want to leave."
"Leave?" Antoinette raised her eyebrows. "Do you think I'd send you away so late? Your bed is still here. You can just go to sleep, and go back tomorrow."
"Well…"
"Can you clear your tight schedule tomorrow?" Antoinette raised her eyebrows. "I don't know when the next time you can come back here will be. Meg is away with Lucien's mother for the weekend, but she's unlikely to be in Paris again anytime soon. Just stay here."
"Fine, I suppose, thank you", he scratched his scalp awkwardly. Antoinette took a clean set of bedding, set it up as he protested he could very well do it himself, and then took a glass of water and set it by his bed.
"That's it. I'll let you have some privacy." She looked around the room to see if anything was missing. "Wake me up in the morning so we can have breakfast."
Erik nodded silently. He didn't want her to leave.
Antoinette looked at him, then raised her hand to slowly and gently run it through his hair. "Good night, sweetheart."
Time slowed down as her hand brushed against his scalp and the skin on his temple, right next to the mask. Erik stood frozen on the spot, hoping if he didn't move she wouldn't move either, and they'd both stay like that forever. Maybe he could forget that this comfortable and warm room would never be enough for him; that he would grow restless until he went mad without hearing music and experiencing life from the only comfortable distance he could bear. Maybe he could forget that she could never keep him here, that she already had a child and a whole battalion of students; that he was too strange and his nightly terrors too loud for her to keep him in this small and stuffy apartment with her daughter and her neighbors. Maybe he could make himself into a person who could go outside and handle life on his own; maybe he could somehow miraculously become someone people wouldn't look twice at or someone who could talk to others in complete sentences and look them in the eye like any other person. Maybe he could pull the dark tendrils of rot out of his head and live like everyone else. But he didn't know how.
He didn't say any of that. He would never in a million years have the courage to say that out loud. But something about him must have given some part of it away because Antoinette looked at him strangely and pulled

him into a tight hug before she left the room.
Erik remained standing in the middle of the room as she closed the door behind her for a good few minutes before he finally snapped out of it and went to bed.
New York, 1895.
"Good morning, Carol", Daniel sang as he entered the Conservatory.
"It's Caroline, sugar", the receptionist replied. "And it's afternoon."
"Sorry, Clarice. How are you? What's that you're reading today?"
"On the Origin of Species", Caroline mumbled into her chin. "Leave me alone."
"Aw, but I know you didn't just suddenly become that boring! Come on, let me see!" Daniel craned his neck, but Caroline snapped her book out of his reach.
"Piss off, Dan!" she said. "It's a love story if you have to know!"
Dan withdrew his arms and waved his hands in a peaceful gesture.
"Sorry, sorry, enjoy your romantic fiction in peace. What's the newest gossip?"
"The newest gossip is that some bratty young soloist is missing from Heidel's orchestral rehearsals. I'm sure you've heard of the rumors?"
Caroline smiled at Daniel behind thick glasses.
"I have no idea what you're talking about", Daniel said innocently.
"You're such a little bastard, Daniel. Is that why they kicked you out of the Academy?" Caroline slammed her book closed.
"What? Who said that?" Daniel's voice faltered for a second before it resumed its normal mischievous tone. "That may be one part of the rumor, but it's not true at all! I passed it, I finished college! Barely but fairly, Cassandra!" he waved his fingers in the air. "I even have a diploma to prove it, although these days I mostly use it as a coaster."
"How very controversial of you!" Caroline fluttered her eyelashes. "And now, what do you want from me?"
"Just the keys to the roof. I want to have a smoke."
"Aha? Alright, sugar, you can have the keys. And what are you going to do about your rehearsals with the orchestra?"
"That's another thing", Daniel purred. "I was going to ask you to tell Heidel I'm still working with Erik today if he happens to come looking for me."
"That wouldn't be a problem", Caroline purred back, "Except Giry is going to come looking for you long before Heidel, and then you're screwed."

"Not if you tell him I'm auditing the orchestral rehearsals."
"You're screwed either way, Daniel! Do you think they won't figure it out soon enough? I'm not losing my job over your stupid grudge with authority!" Caroline yelled now. "Get down there and do your goddamn job! I want nothing to do with this!"
"Noooo, Coraline, please!" Daniel threw himself over her desk in mock desperation as he looked at her with a pleading look that probably usually worked on young girls. "I promise I'll face the Big Bad Wolf soon, just not today! I'm not quite ready yet!"
"Get off my desk, you little prick!" Caroline laughed, pushing him off; Daniel slid down with the same grin of mischief and desperation. "Fine, you get your keys to the roof, but I'm not going to feed your stupid web of lies! Get off the goddamn roof and into the rehearsals, and get my goddamn keys back before eight!"
"Thank you, Catherine the Great!" Daniel clinked with his keys as he skittered toward the roof. On his way up he ran into the janitor, who was currently fixing one of the lights on the second floor.
"Good afternoon, Mr. Halasz."
"Good afternoon, Dan", said Halasz. "Skipping your classes again?"
"I'm not a student, so I'm skipping my job", Daniel clarified. "Do you need help?"
"Yes, actually, since you're not in a hurry", Halasz took off his toolbelt and threw it at Daniel, who barely caught it on time. "Hold this. When I say you pass me something, do it quickly."
"Got it", Daniel said.
After he was done, he took his time going up the roof. It was early enough that nobody would look for him for at least half an hour. As he opened the door to the roof, he was hit by a wave of unexpectedly warm wind - it was going to be one of the last really warm sunny days of the year, with crickets chirping and birds singing, even though the sun was already lower and it's light more orange than it was in the summer. Daniel walked up to the rail and leaned, taking out his tobacco and rolling paper. He looked at the view from the balcony as he lit the match. He found the house where Louis used to live, way back in the distance, right where he could barely make it out. Daniel wiped his eyes with his sleeve and turned to look the other way.
Oliver never ceased his cheerful chit-chat as Erik led him to his seat in the front row of the auditorium. The orchestra tensed as they passed next to

them, afraid of Erik but at the same time, not nearly as afraid as he was of them. Oliver sat down, laid his cane on the ground, and cracked his fingers. "I'll just be listening today", he announced to the orchestra, turning in their general direction. "You don't have to mind me. I'm over here, learning my cues, fearing the same great dictator as you are."
Several of the members chuckled slightly.
"Which is not me, by the way", Erik added in what he thought was a normal tone of voice, but the acoustics of the room carried it enough that most of the orchestra sitting close to Oliver heard him. He realized that fact when they all started to giggle again, followed by whispering, "What? What did he say?", more whispering and then more giggling.
Erik's ears burned red with embarrassment as he sat next to Oliver. He didn't look at the orchestra even once.
"Is Dan coming?" Oliver asked.
"I wish I knew that", Erik replied, much quieter than before. "He said he'd come this week, but it's been several days since I've seen him. Or since anyone's seen him."
"Nobody has seen him?"
"No."
"Have you asked around?"
"I've asked Heidel."
"There's nobody in this building less likely to know where Daniel is. Even if somebody here knows, they'd never tell Heidel of all people."
"Well, do you have any other ideas?" Erik's fingers twitched in frustration, which nobody could thankfully see. His black gloves melted into the dark velvet upholstery.
"Yes, ask around yourself. You're not going to get a lot of inside information on your orchestra if you're only working with the man on top." Oliver continued, "But not now. Heidel will be here any minute. Ask during the first break. In the meantime, you have to help me out here."
Heidel arrived shortly, cleaning his glasses against his coat as he walked briskly towards his spot. All of the orchestra tensed and straightened, including (and especially) Erik in his seat next to Oliver. Oliver was the only one who remained his usual attitude, waving in Heidel's general direction.
"Good to see you, Olly", Heidel remarked. "Just listening, or will you be joining us?"

"I'll listen for now", Oliver replied. "I can join in after the first half if you two so decide."
"I'll leave that one to Erik", Heidel waved his hand at Erik to emphasize. "I'm only here to teach my students; arrange the rehearsals as you wish."
Heidel had no intention of meddling in Erik's vision of the final product, but also no intention to take any responsibility for it. He was busy enough, and already stretched thin. He would stay only until at least one of his conducting students was ready to take over.
None of the conducting students looked particularly ready. They were, in fact, somewhat uneasy, unprepared, and overworked. This was all a bit too much on top of everything else they had to do before the end of their semester.
"Jonsson isn't joining us today?" Heidel asked Erik. Erik opened his mouth but managed to say nothing, his cheeks and ears burning.
"It would be better for him to at least listen, if he doesn't want to participate in rehearsals yet", Heidel grumbled after a few incredibly awkward, terrifying seconds of silence. "It will be a battle just getting him to appear."
"I will take care of it", Erik managed, straightening up in a desperate attempt to look like he has some control of his production.
"I'm fine with having all of his attention for now", Oliver replied lightly nudging Erik with his elbow, which made Erik flinch and students giggle once again. "Don't worry, Maestro, Daniel will do his part. I have no doubts about it."
I do, Erik thought. Heidel began the rehearsal.
"Miss Caroline", Erik stormed into the hallway and walked up to Caroline's desk. "I'm sorry to interrupt your daily reading, but I've lost something."
"I'm listening", Caroline put down her novel and took her glasses off, unnerved by the sarcasm. "What did you lose?"
"My violinist."
"Oh, again? A flighty little creature, isn't he? Where did you see him last?" she replied, shuffling through her guest book for Daniel's signature and time of arrival. She lifted her eyes back at Erik, who was staring at her with annoyance.
"I haven't seen him in days", he squeezed out through his teeth. "I know he allegedly keeps coming every day, but I somehow always miss him when I'm here."
"Well, that's unfortunate", Caroline replied tensely. They stared at each

other for a few more seconds.
"Listen, I like that kid", she continued. "Don't go too hard on him. Little chicken heart went to have a smoke on the roof. I'm sure you can still catch him."
"Oh, I will", Erik said in a tone of voice that made Caroline look at him with surprise, then turned around on his heel and sped up the staircase.
"Hey, I mean it!" she yelled after him. "If you harass him, you and I are no longer friends!"
"Noted", Erik hissed to himself.
"Daniel?" Daniel heard a familiar voice behind him. Fuck. There was no way of escaping him now - Dan's best bet was to think of some believable explanation for why he was avoiding rehearsals and hiding on the roof like a kid skipping school. Daniel turned around and looked at him, trying his best to look apologetic and like there was some mistake, he wasn't feeling well, he's truly sorry - but something in Erik's movements betrayed he was so furious that Daniel simply froze in place as soon as he saw him.
"What are you doing here? The rehearsals have started. You said you'd come and listen this week." Erik asked in a tense, controlled voice, stopping a few feet away from Daniel.
"I- I wasn't feeling well so I came here to get some air", Daniel managed, fidgeting with unease. "Must be the heat."
"You weren't feeling well?" Erik repeated blankly. "So you managed to climb the stairs to the roof? Where there's sunlight and more heat?"
Daniel looked down, then to the side, unable to return Erik's gaze for another moment. He didn't care about keeping the lie believable; right now the wisest thing he could do was probably just let everything pass as quickly as possible.
"Do you take me for an idiot?" Erik asked quietly. "Is this the kind of cooperation I'm supposed to expect from you now?"
"I'm sorry, sir", Daniel recited into the sky. "I'll get back down immediately."
"Like hell you are!" Erik finally snapped and yelled. "What is this game you're playing with me? Why do you act this way around me? Have I done anything so far other than giving you as much freedom and respect as I can - and instead of talking to me like an adult, you lie to me and run away randomly?"
"There's nothing I need to talk to you about!" Daniel yelled back, deciding

to put Erik's alleged patience to the test. "I have some problems in my private life which are very much none of your business, and you're welcome to accept it or find a new soloist! I'm allowed to have other things on my mind aside from these rehearsals!"
"Yes, we all are", Erik snapped back automatically. "And we all work through those things at home, before we come here!"
"Good for you!" Daniel yelled back. "I'm glad you're all so mature! Although I don't remember Heidel sending someone to chastise you when you were gone for several days!"
Erik stopped and closed his mouth. "Heidel didn't send me. I haven't told him you're here", was all he could manage. Heidel didn't send him, no, but Heidel's disapproving look sped up his chase.
Daniel, with his chest heaving with anger and his brows furrowed, decided to get another sentence or two in, now that Erik was already too shocked to argue with him.
"Yes, I'm aware most people handle their things in their spare time, and that's just great for them", Daniel spat out. "I don't, and I'm well aware of how disruptive that is. I'm up here so I wouldn't be disruptive, and even my absence is somehow disruptive. Short of going down and pretending for hours that there's nothing wrong with me, there is nothing I can do to be non-disruptive- and as you've noticed, I can't goddamn play the violin while I'm pretending to be someone I'm not. It's sort of a personal flaw."
Erik was still silent, but something in his eyes was softening a bit.
"You should let me go back to playing in a bar", Daniel looked at Erik directly, his eyes red and his expression still furious, but his voice was quiet. "You'll have a much better time preparing your first symphony if your performers can follow through. And I functioned much better in a place that asked nothing of me. Maybe that's where I belong, I just haven't accepted that yet."
Erik blinked. Something behind his eyes seemingly cracked, and Daniel suddenly realized nothing was terrifying about him anymore.
"Daniel", Erik said softly. "If you were nervous, you could have simply told me. What am I supposed to think if you disappear without a word?"
Daniel frowned stubbornly, determined that the redness stinging his eyes would be the only thing betraying him right now.
Erik sighed and continued. "I admit, someone else probably might have guessed, but I'm not good at it. It will be much easier if you don't assume I

can guess these things, and just tell me."
"Stop patronizing me. I'm going to do my goddamn job", Daniel replied with fury. "I'll do it."
"Of course. Maybe not right now", Erik scratched at his temple, trying to think. "You can take some time to sort out your personal life. Heidel will do his usual rehearsal with the orchestra. I'll find some excuse, and nobody will question me."
Daniel scoffed. "I could have made an excuse myself. I'm probably better at lying to Heidel and skipping rehearsals than you are."
"Sure. But I told you already, I'll be on your side."
"But that's not why I'm here! I'm here because I don't want to make excuses! I don't want to be a disaster for the rest of my life! I want to go there and act normal! I just need some time, dammit!"
Erik sighed. If he squinted, he could probably see the irony in the air around them.
"Daniel", he tried again, pulling every word out with difficulty. "What… would you like me to do about this, exactly?"
"I would like everyone to just leave me alone to do as I like. But I have to be able to do my job like everyone else, don't I?" Daniel finally turned to him. "The orchestra depends on one another, and I don't see anyone else on this roof!"
"Except me", Erik said quietly. "I… this is the first time I'm participating in something like this. It's eating me alive, to be entirely honest."
Daniel frowned. "Why? This is one of the most peaceful productions I've been a part of, so far."
"Well, perhaps I just need everyone to leave me alone for a bit to sort things out with myself, but as per usual, I don't have that option. So I'll have to deal with things as they come, and hope the production doesn't end in shambles. And hope I don't say or do something that will ruin my future."
Daniel finally looked away, mumbling "Sorry."
"Others at the Conservatory like you", Erik continued indifferently with his arms still crossed. "The students will not cause you any issues. So, I don't understand what upsets you so much about these rehearsals, aside from Heidel - who, as I've said, will be off the project as soon as he can delegate it to some poor young conductor. I know you could do your job even despite hating it, because you've done it before, but even so - I'd like to help."

Daniel shrugged. "Thank you. I don't think you can."
"Did Heidel say something to you?" Erik interrupted. "You know, I'll talk to him. Technically, your solo is my job, not his."
"He's just his usual self", Daniel shrugged. "You know, it doesn't - didn't - always bother me. There was a time when we all thought he was kinda funny, back when we were in college."
"We?" Erik asked carefully. "Students?"
"Louis and me", Daniel looked at his hands. "I mean, Louis was terrified of him, but he used to make jokes about everything, so it all wasn't so bad. We started college together - he was a little older than me. He moved out after two years - got a scholarship in Philadelphia."
"He hasn't come back?" Erik asked carefully.
"Not that I know of. We lost contact after he left."
"Huh." Erik didn't know how much else he was allowed to ask, so he stared silently at the sky. "So you were often performing together, I presume?"
"Often, yes. If we weren't both on the same project, which was rare, the other one would always come on the opening night."
"I see", Erik felt a moment of inspiration. "Is he coming now? For the concert?"
Daniel pretended not to hear him.
"Any other friends?" Erik asked.
"Nah."
"Family?"
Daniel laughed a very miserable laugh, even though he wanted to go back to playing deaf. "No. My parents won't be coming. They're not too happy about my career choices."
"Surely they will be happy that you're performing with an orchestra again?"
"It's not up to their standards", Daniel squeezed through his teeth.
"They'll come when I've got myself together again."
Erik blinked. "They said that?"
Daniel sighed.
"They'll come once you already have your life together? Not while you are doing it?" Erik ran his fingers through his hair. "That must be very convenient for them, I gather? To not be there for the struggle, just the applause?"
Daniel turned to look at him - something in his voice surprised him. "I suppose they want to avoid any embarrassment. They're very… they're

weird about their reputation."
"No, I agree, it would be incredibly rude of you to embarrass them, after they've put in all this effort", Erik spat out. "Tell me - do all rich people see their children as just another investment, or am I just imagining it?"
"Um, I don't know", Daniel stuttered. "What the hell?"
"Do you think this project is beneath you?" Erik looked at him. It was always gnawing at the back of his head but he never really got the courage to ask before now.
"What?" Daniel narrowed his eyes at Erik. "Beneath me? I've been playing all over New York for the past year just so I could have some breathing room and freedom, away from those people. Do you think I care about their bullshit? I only care about music - to be precise, I only care about playing music I like."
"True and false", Erik pointed his finger at him. "You also care about being appreciated for it. You want to play the music you like, and be adored while doing it. Don't lie to yourself, just admit it."
"Well, people like them will never appreciate me, and maybe it's time I accepted that! Maybe I'm a disgrace, and I just don't fit with them, so what!" Daniel yelled. "I was very good at faking it for a very long time, but frankly, it's getting old! Yes, it's very nice to be told you're among the elite, but it's not worth selling your soul - not for Heidel's approval, not for my stupid parents!"
"Good, then you have no problem at all!" Erik raised his voice, more from a reflex as Daniel yelled at him than from any kind of real anger.
"No! I don't! Except for every time I see Heidel, it reminds me how I'm too goddamn weird for the normal people, and too goddamn normal for the weird people! I'm in this weird limbo that nobody can name, but they're all very sure I don't fit with them!" Daniel covered his face with his hands. "My folks don't have to like what I'm doing, but c-c-couldn't they just, make themselves come and listen, this one time?"
Erik realized, to his horror, that the young man who once slammed a door in his face was now silently crying before his eyes.
What is it about me that makes people cry?
He had no idea what to do - well, he could think of some things, but they were all horrifyingly awkward from his perspective, and he'd rather not do them. But Daniel, with his face in his hands and his eyes peeking, red and

teary, between his fingers as he stared at the ground was hard to look at any longer.
"Please believe me that I didn't mean to provoke or upset you", Erik managed barely as a whisper. "I didn't know about any of this."
"I'm sorry", he tried again. "I don't know what to say - I can't fix that. But there will be plenty of people listening. I will be in the audience as well, and so will my wife, who can't wait to hear you perform. The orchestra - they're all younger than you; they'll see you as their hero. If that means anything."
"Whatever", Daniel rubbed his eyes, quickly going back to pretending his outburst never happened. "So, what are we going to do? Is there still time to go to rehearsal?"
"There isn't much rehearsal left, but sure."
Daniel's shoulders slumped as they walked downstairs, even though he lit up as he saw the janitor with other staff members standing in the hallway waving at him. They were talking to Caroline who seemed upset about something; she looked at Erik and stopped awkwardly, then walked up to them.
"So you've found each other", she said. "I'd like my keys back."
Daniel took the keys out of his pocket and handed them over without a word.
Caroline spun the keys around her finger. "Sir, if we're in trouble, I'd like to know in advance. I gave him the keys, and the janitor saw him leave, so if he shouldn't have been on the roof then all three of us are guilty if anything. But we've always let older students and staff up there upon request."
"You're talking to me?" Erik looked at her, surprised by the sudden formality. "No, everything's fine, I don't care who goes on the roof. I was under pressure to find out where Daniel was as soon as possible. Thank you for your help, Caroline."
"It's just that, earlier you seemed-"
"Ooooh, are you worried about me? So you do have a heart, Christine?", Daniel chirped, which got him both an impressive eye roll from Caroline and a confused look from Erik.
"Piss off, Dan. Well, I'm glad it's all right now. You can still make the rehearsal, they're all still in there."
Daniel's charm that emanated around him when he was around other people seemed to visibly dim and leave him looking smaller, like a grey shadow of

his mischievous self as he entered the auditorium. Heidel was talking to his conducting students but stopped as soon as he saw them enter; Erik waved at him hoping to stop him from saying whatever remark he was about to say.
"Good evening, Mr. Jonsson. It's nice to see you at last." The sarcasm in his tone was contained, but still apparent - and devastating. Daniel nodded, and mumbled "thanks", looking like he was starting to regret all of it. Normally, if it had been Erik who said it, Daniel would have shot something back at him immediately, but Heidel was different. Heidel was to be taken seriously.
Well, I can see why they don't get along, Erik sighed. He wasn't any more eager to address this than Daniel was, but he had to do something before it got any more awkward. Swallowing his urge to run away, he climbed onto the stage and passed the orchestra and the conducting students (all of whom shifted very slightly and subtly to move away from him), and stopped next to Heidel.
"Maestro", Erik whispered to Heidel, "If it's alright with you, I'd let him sit this one out."
Heidel shrugged. "I'll leave it to your judgment if you wish. As long as we're on schedule, it's fine."
Daniel sat down in the seat right next to Oliver. Oliver whispered something to him that not even Erik could hear, and Daniel smiled sincerely for the first time in a long time.

Author's Note

Hi, I'm Manna Huizar. I write poetry, songs, biographies, and fictional stories that tie to myself. Because I have a lot of feelings I have never let out in years. These books, poems, and songs. Are about me releasing my feelings. And are also morals of what I learned over the years. I hope you like what wrote. Enjoy. I will be making volume. 3 soon. ☺😊